

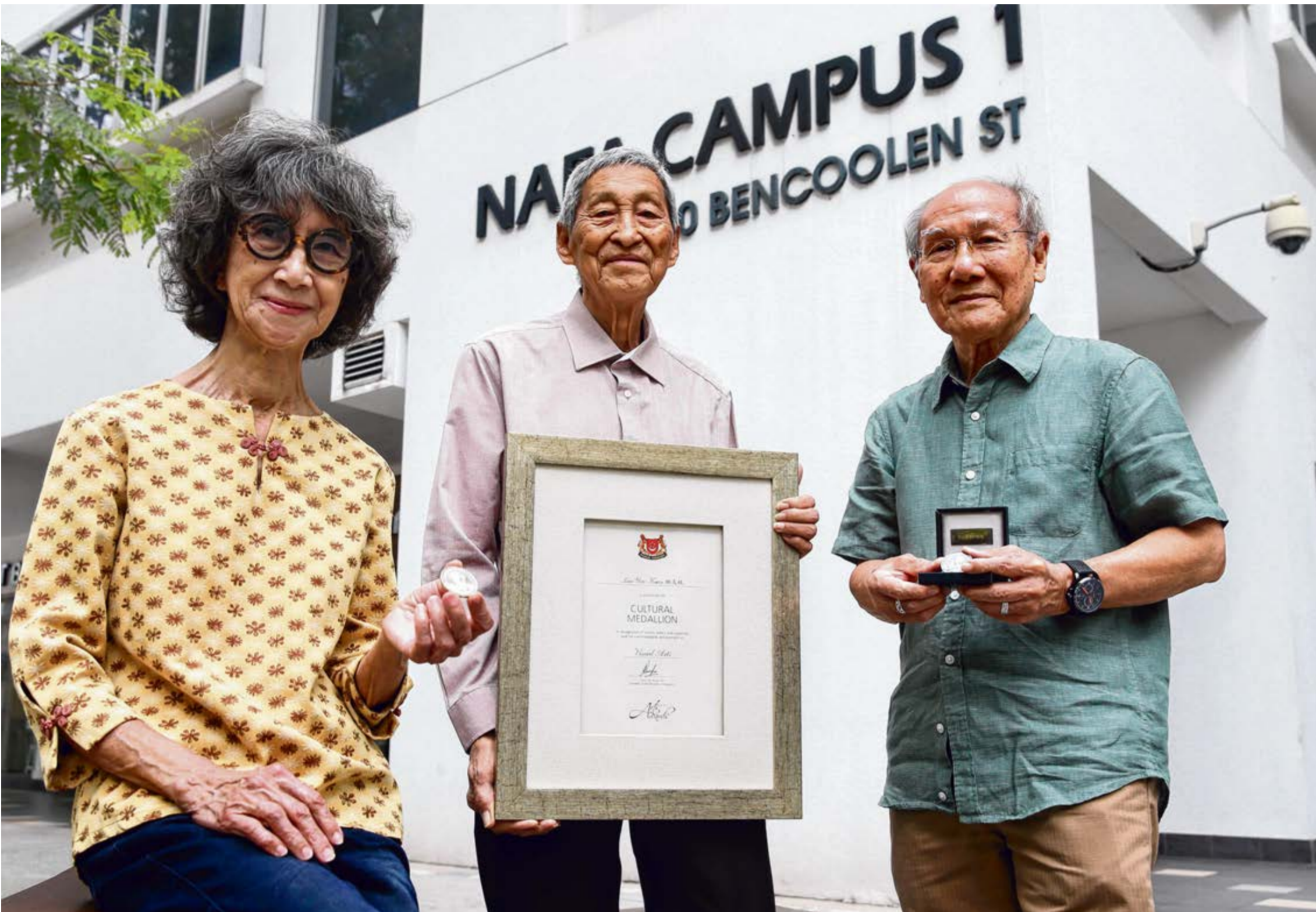
# life

**D** CULTURE VULTURE  
Taking stock of  
Singapore's arts fest  
D4

**I'll look back  
on this and  
smile because  
it was life  
and I decided  
to live it.**

— Author unknown

Live more.  
Bank less. 



Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts has produced the most Cultural Medallion recipients, including (from far left) Han Sai Por, Lim Yew Kuan and Thomas Yeo.  
ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

## Nanyang spirit spurs school's success

The success of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, which celebrates its 80th anniversary this year, can be credited to the vision of seeing art as a way of responding to the community



**Benson Ang**

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) celebrates its 80th anniversary this year and it boasts a history that is intertwined with the development of the local arts scene.

About 14,000 students have graduated from Singapore's oldest arts education institution, including 13 Cultural Medallion awardees, such as sculptor Han Sai Por and painter Thomas Yeo, as well as 14 Young Artist Award recipients such as multi-disciplinary artist Ezzam Rahman, 37, and theatre practitioner

Goh Boon Teck, 46. The strong school spirit is evident from the fact that quite a few of its alumni returned to teach, including Han, 74.

The comprehensive arts education institution has come a long way from its early days as a fine arts school with only 14 students and it marks its milestone year with a series of events.

It was established in 1938 by a group of arts education enthusiasts, who planned for a school modelled after Chinese art academies, but with a balance of Western and Chinese art traditions in its curriculum.

Its founding principal was Xiamen-born artist Lim Hak Tai and its first home was an old two-storey shophouse in Geylang, opposite the former Gay World Amusement Park. There, the school shared space with the Society of Chinese Artists and they co-organised activities such as guest artist lectures by Chinese painters Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu.

As student enrolment increased, the school moved to a bungalow in Serangoon Road, with its pioneer batch of students graduating in 1940.

But trying times lay ahead. Due to World War II, the school was closed from 1941 to 1945.

Despite re-opening in St Thomas Walk, it was soon dealt another blow when Mr Lim died in 1963. His son, Nafa alumnus Lim Yew Kuan, now 89, became its second principal in 1964.

The 1970s presented even more challenges. Singapore's separation from Malaya in 1965 had a negative impact on student enrolment and the 1973 oil crisis led to tough economic times. To relieve its financial troubles, a group of graduates sold their artworks in 1974 to raise \$120,000 for Nafa.

Slowly, things began to turn a corner. In 1976, the school started painting classes for children, who would form a pool of potential students. Within two years, there were about 180 students in full-time, part-time, evening and weekend courses, taught by 12 lecturers who were well-known local artists. The subjects included Chinese ink painting, pencil sketching, oil painting, sculpture and other art theoretical studies.

Various other departments were soon set up, such as interior design in 1983, music and dance in 1984, and fashion design in 1986.

After Lim Yew Kuan's tenure, Nafa had four other principals – Wu Tsung Kan, Gwee Yee Hean, Soh Kay Cheng and Ho Kah Leong. The

academy has been headed by a president since 2003, with the first being former chief executive of the National Arts Council Choo Thiam Siew. In 2014, he passed the baton to former Ngee Ann Polytechnic principal Chia Mia Chiang, Nafa's current president.

Over the years, the academy's campus has also moved several times, to places such as Short Street and Middle Road. In 2004, it moved to its current home at Bencoolen Street and, in February this year, it expanded this campus space with a new facility above Bencoolen MRT station housing state-of-the-art classrooms, studios and student interaction spaces.

In recent years, the academy curriculum has also grown from strength to strength. In 2011, it became the first comprehensive arts education institution to receive the coveted four-year EduTrust certification, awarded by the Committee for Private Education. In 2015, Nafa was given this certification for another four years.

It currently offers specialised programmes in 3D design, arts management, design and media, fine art, fashion studies, dance, music and theatre.

Mr Jerry Soo, the vice-president

of Nafa's academic division, says arts education has changed with the evolving arts scene, changing demographic mix and student preferences for post-secondary education, and that Nafa has adapted to these changes in various ways.

Last year, the school broadened the curriculum to expose students to a range of life skills and work experiences, such as through overseas immersion programmes, its Entrepreneurship@Nafa programme and industry-based learning modules. "This is to ensure that our curriculum is aligned to the needs of the industry and help our students develop relevant skill sets for future employment and career opportunities."

Mr Soo says Nafa's success is due to the vision defined by its founding principal and fellow pioneers, which is to see art as a way of responding to the community and as a medium for social commentary.

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• For more information on Nafa's 80th anniversary celebratory events, go to [www.nafa.edu.sg/events/nafa-80th-anniversary-celebrations](http://www.nafa.edu.sg/events/nafa-80th-anniversary-celebrations)

**MORE STORIES**  
on D2



FROM D1



Han Sai Por (above) unveiled her stainless steel sculpture, *Seed*, at the official opening of Nafa's new Campus 1 Tower Block above Bencoolen MRT station in February. ST PHOTOS: GAVIN FOO

## Finding her confidence in Nafa

Sculptor Han Sai Por, 74, recalls a peaceful environment, lovely classmates and having well-known artists as teachers.

This is what she recalls of her time in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) in the 1970s, where she majored in Western painting and took supplementary courses in Chinese painting.

The 1995 Cultural Medallion recipient, one of Asia's leading modern sculptors, says: "I really enjoyed my time there. The students sometimes organised our own activities outside of class, such as outdoor drawing sessions at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, human figure drawing sessions and discussion forums.

"During the forums, we would put up one of the student artworks and discuss what was good, and not good, about it. That was how we all improved."

Her time in school also helped her grow in confidence. She says: "I was a very quiet, rather clumsy kid, and no one wanted to play with me. I was not confident at all and only my mother considered me special.

"But when I was at Nafa, my classmates encouraged me to speak up and express myself, whether it was through words, or through my art."

After graduation, she went on to study fine art in Britain and returned to Nafa as a part-time lecturer in the 1980s.

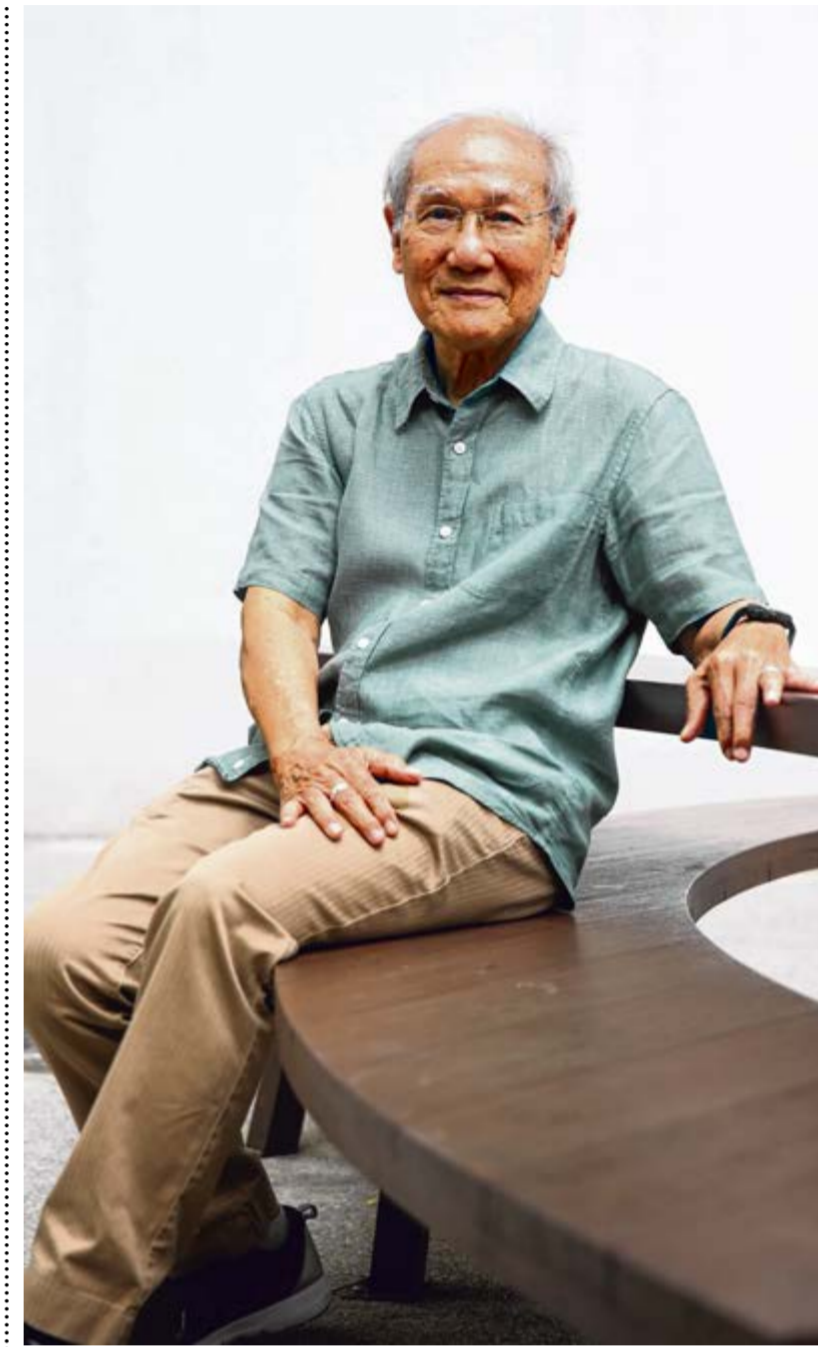
She says: "I returned because I wanted to show how grateful and thankful I am to the school and its pioneer artists for contributing to art education in Singapore. Their passion made me want to contribute too."

And although most of her students proceeded to work in other fields, she is happy that some have followed in her footsteps and become artists.

In February, her stainless steel sculpture, titled *Seed*, was unveiled at the official opening of Nafa's new Campus 1 Tower Block above Bencoolen MRT station.

She says: "I wanted to show that every student has the seed of art inside them. Nafa is there to nurture this seed into a beautiful love for the arts."

Benson Ang



Thomas Yeo met his mentor, the late Singapore pioneer artist Cheong Soo Pieng, at Nafa, and continued to stay in touch with him after graduating.

## Continuing his father's legacy

Painter, printmaker and sculptor Lim Yew Kuan, 89, was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2011.

The son of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) founding principal Lim Hak Tai, this second-generation Nanyang artist was the school's second principal and he steered it through some of its most difficult times in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to a 2011 Straits Times report, during his time as principal, Nafa almost ran itself aground until the Chinese community helped to raise funds.

In the article, the younger Lim was quoted as saying: "I'm not a good administrator, that's why there were so many financial troubles."

Speaking to The Straits Times recently in his Bukit Batok flat, he says: "My father set up the institution because he himself was trained in the arts. I followed him and, after he passed away, I wanted to continue what he started."

Looking at Nafa today, Lim says: "I think it is totally different.

"When I was studying there, it was mainly still a fine arts school. Now there is dance, music, so many disciplines catering to people with diverse interests. The school has really come a long way."

On the emergence of new arts institutions, he adds: "I don't think this is a bad thing. It means there are now more avenues to groom talent."

Asked whether it is easier nowadays to be an artist, he says: "That is a hard question to answer. I think you still need a lot of passion and focus if you want to be a professional artist."

Benson Ang



Lim Yew Kuan (above) took over his father, Lim Hak Tai, who was Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts' founding principal, and steered it through some of its most difficult times in the 1960s and 1970s.

## Becoming friends with his mentor

Painter Thomas Yeo, 82, who attended Nafa in the 1950s, received the Cultural Medallion in 1984.

It was at the academy that the full-time artist met his mentor, the late Singapore pioneer artist Cheong Soo Pieng.

Cheong is known for his depictions of Malay women with elongated limbs. His most famous work is the 1978 painting *Drying Salted Fish*, which is featured on the back of the Singapore \$50 note. He died of heart failure in 1983 at the age of 66.

Yeo studied under him and remembers him as a man of few words, who led by example.

He says: "He dedicated his whole life to art. He was obsessed with it and painted all day – several pictures at once – until it was time to go home.

"He was such a perfectionist. I was touched by his discipline and love for painting and tried to inculcate this spirit in myself."

Cheong also gave his disciple a good foundation by teaching him all about composition and the way paintings are created.

Yeo notes: "They say that in art, good artists know how to break the rules. But to do this, you must know

what the rules are first."

Even after he graduated from Nafa in 1960 and proceeded to study in the Chelsea School of Art and the Hammersmith College of Art & Architecture, both in London, he kept in touch with his former teacher.

And when Cheong visited London in the 1960s, Yeo was his guide and interpreter.

He says: "Mr Cheong spoke only Hokkien and I spoke English, so I became his interpreter when he gave interviews on the radio and TV about an exhibition of his in London.

"When he asked me to help, I could not say no. He was not only my teacher; I considered him my friend."

To Yeo, an arts education is as relevant today as ever.

"Arts education teaches you to be sharp and trains your eyes to be sensitive to tiny details about everything in life," he says. "You notice things which other people do not."

"I think this is not just important for artists, but also for anyone who wants to lead a good life."

Benson Ang