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Encountering Limits: The University Museum

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Wu Tsai-yen, *Three Friends in Winter* (1953), Finger painting in Chinese ink and colours; 97 x 33.5 cm, gift of Malcolm MacDonald. NUS Museum S1955-0106-001-0

Wu Tsai Yen (1911–2001) was born in China's Fujian province, on the cusp of the birth of Republican China. His artistic formation coincided with the zeitgeist of cultural modernization within China, and the artist had studied finger painting under Pan Tianshou at the modern Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts in Shanghai. Brightly coloured pigments, natural and botanical motifs remained a key feature of Wu's finger-painted art throughout his life.

In 1938, Wu arrived in Singapore, where he was to settle for the rest of his life. Under the patronage of the magnate Loke Wan Tho, Wu rose to prominence in the local artistic circles. Through Loke, Wu became acquainted with Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia based in Malaya (1948–1954), and made many gifts of his paintings to the Commissioner-General. When MacDonald left Malaya in 1955, he donated his personal collection of artworks acquired during his tenure to the University of Malaya Art Museum, based in Singapore.

The featured painting *Three Friends of Winter* (Pine, Bamboo and Plum Blossoms) is one of Wu's paintings for MacDonald, which came into the University of Malaya's collection (today the collection of the NUS Museum). While the motif of the pine, bamboo and plum blossoms symbolize steadfastness and resilience (and is used often as a designation of the characteristics of the motifs' recipients), Wu had also cleverly played on the theme of winter and the appearance of the plants to turn the motif into a Christmas greeting to MacDonald (indicated by the colophon): the pine tree here takes the place of the pine of Noel, the plum blossoms and the bamboo leaves a visual play of the holly and the ivy.

Chang Yueh Siang

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