Increasing secularization and a growing desire for joining hands seems to be a paradox of our times. This has become particularly evident in the joint efforts of the National Art Museums of Japan, Korea and Singapore, whose curators, together with noted art historians, curators and in cooperation with the Japan Foundation, started tracing Cubism in 11 Asian countries as an introduction to the writing of Asian Art History. The findings of the team are shown in an exhibition titled Cubism in Asia, currently on show at the Singapore Art Museum, until April 26. It brings together 109 works by 73 artists, bringing together the best-known artists from each of 11 countries, including those who early on showed cubistic features.

Among important findings is the surprising similarity in the ways in which cubism was adapted and transformed, adjusting to existing cultural settings in each of the 11 countries researched, which led to the discovery of their own local indigenous dimensions. It is the more remarkable as cubism came to various countries in different periods.

Cubism, a term implying a modern art movement associated with Pablo Picasso 1882-1973 and Georges Braque 1882-1963, who developed it between 1908 and 1912, wanted to establish a new plastic order completely different from the one that had existed up to that time.

In Asia, cubism as found in all the major cities, was more 'something like, but not the same as the original'. In the Philippines, a predominantly Catholic country, the image of the Virgin Mary adopts a Filipino countenance, as seen in Cesar Legaspi's 'Mother and Child', 1954. Meanwhile, 'Mother's Love' by Latiff Mohidin from Malaysia represents modern local realities with a mother holding her child while smoking a cigarette. On the other hand, one can see the glorification of the goddess in the illumination of the semitransparent face in 'Avalokitesvara' (1921) by Koga Harue of Japan.

Another unique feature is multilayered transparency, shared in different regions that did not interact directly with each other, exemplified by Vicente Manansala's 'Mother and Child' (1966), 'Opera Figures' by Lin Feng-mian (early 1950s). Yet another unique feature is found in the vertically divided pictorial structure seen in Filipino Manansale's 'Collage' (1969), Indonesia's Popo Iskandar's Tanaman (1958), India's Rabin Mondal's Brothel Series II (1982), Malaysian Tay Hooi Keat's Plantscape (1959).

Cubism came to Asia quite early in the 20th century, with the earliest examples found in Japan in Yorozu Tetsugoro's expressionistic Self-Portrait with Red Eye (1912), and Leaning Woman (1917). Initially, it was taken up by painters who knew cubism only from re-
Another endeavor to connect is seen in the workshop on The Multi-Facet ed Curator, organized by the Goethe Institut Jakarta in cooperation with Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) known as promoting better mutual understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe. Eighteen curators, all under forty of age, and coming from 17 European (incl. Germany based in HK, Hungary based in Vietnam, France, Greece, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Portugal, Italy based in China and UK) and Asian (incl. China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Korea based in Holland and Sweden, and Indonesia) countries were brought together based on proven interest in cross-cultural concepts.

Marla Stukenberg of the Goethe Institut Jakarta revealed, the idea for the workshop emerged in the face of increased curatorial activity in an environment where boundaries of categories are disappearing. So what actually is a curator, his/her role and responsibilities towards artists- the art works- the society- contemporary art? Dynamic group discussions on issues of identity, language, local/global led to important insights in the search for new ways of curatorial strategies. Ultimately, as renowned international curator, and director of the Visual Arts Program at MIT, Uta Meta Bauer noted, it’s about access and having a backbone as well as imagination.

While personal encounters between curators from various cultures and different daily realities and sharing was an important step into finding new curatorial strategies, it also became clear that it was not possible to draw a general line across countries, not only because of the variety of cultural and socio-political realities, but also because of major art educational gaps hampering contemporary visions.

The Indonesian curator and arts critic Enin Supriyanto suggested that the European participants become a resource for a kind of Open Academy for Curatorial Studies, which he proposed to start in Indonesia. If this becomes a reality, it would be a major contribution of a workshop’s objective of finding new curatorial strategies. The ball is in the court of the Goethe Institut, ASEF and other interested funding agencies.