

The Image of Our Landscape

19th Century Singapore through Paintings, Prints and Photographs

By Wong Hong Suen

The entire circumference of the island is one panorama, where the magnificent tropical forest with its undergrowth of jungle, runs down at one place to the very water's edge, dipping its large leaves into the glassy sea, and at another is abruptly broken by a brown rocky cliff, or a late landslip over which the jungle has not yet had time to extend itself... Eternal summer gilds these shores. Perfumed isles are in many people's minds merely fabled dreams but they are easy of realisation here. There is scarcely a part of the island, except for those few places where the original forest and jungle have been cleared away, from which at night time, on the first breathings of the land winds, may not be felt those lovely forest perfumes, even at the distance of more than a mile from shore.

John Cameron, editor of the Straits Times, penned these words in 1865. It is hard to believe that it is Singapore he was describing. The only National Museum of Singapore originated exhibition for this year that features the museum's permanent collection, *The Image of Our Landscape* helps us picture a Singapore that is very different from today. The 19th century saw Singapore transformed dramatically by trade and commerce, and by a British colonial government eager to develop it into a metropolitan city, reflecting its status as the lynchpin of British strategic and commercial power in the region.

The changing face of the island was recorded by all kinds of people – artists on board arriving ships, specially commissioned naval expeditions undertaken for trade and scientific exploration, naturalists eager to capture its flora and fauna, British administrators or official surveyors, leisure travellers who stopped at Singapore in their journey around the world or professional photographers, some of whom eventually established businesses here.

Most recorded their impressions in writings, but a small group captured their impressions in paintings, prints and photographs. This first part of the exhibition (Canyon) is structured according to the common sites through which 19th century travellers to Singapore traversed and made sense of the landscape. These images document Singapore's topography from early settlement to the turn of the 20th century. They show, for example, how up to the mid 19th century, the town was still surrounded by forests and mangrove swamps; towards the last quarter of the century, the photographs especially reveal a distinct urban environment taking shape. Quotations from various travellers are featured, enabling visitors to understand the mindset and feelings of these amateur and professional artists when confronted with the landscape of Singapore – their sense

Singapore River and Boat Quay, 1830





A bathing place in Seletar, 1869

of wonder, curiosity, rapture but also disappointment and frustration, among a gamut of emotions.

Publishers competed with each other for prints and photographs to use as illustrations in their latest books, enabling these views of Singapore to reach a wider audience. The second part of the exhibition (Balcony) explores the art and industry of print-making, showing how these images were produced and circulated for the market. This space also includes an intimate setting where visitors can learn about the different techniques of print-making and browse books related to the exhibition.

Over 120 original paintings, prints and photographs, albums and illustrated books will be shown in this exhibition, many of which will be displayed for the first time. These include a photographic panorama of Singapore town in the 1880s from Fort Canning by German photographer GR Lambert, a rare 1872 photograph of High Street and Boat Quay by Bourne & Shepherd of India, an 1890s oil painting of Trengganu Street showing a street hawker in the foreground, by Dutch artist Hugo Vilfred Pedersen, as well as an extremely well-executed pair of hand-coloured aquatints of the Singapore River produced by artists on board the French corvette *La Favourite* who sailed to Singapore in 1830, Singapore being one of its stops in its journey around the world, undertaken on the orders of the King of France.

In approaching the collection, co-curator Jason Toh and I have sought to present these images as documentary sources of 19th century Singapore history. Yet, we hope visitors can also be provoked to think about how

A successful tiger hunt, 1890s



Trengganu Street in Chinatown, c. 1897

these images produced by Europeans for an essentially European audience can be considered the heritage of independent Singapore. The limitations of an open space require all the artworks to be displayed in micro-climate frames that contain the artefacts in an environment of controlled temperature and humidity. In this context, we have negotiated and cajoled to display all the key works in the collection, even the highly valuable ones, much to the consternation of our conservation colleagues who speak for the artefacts, or at least their physical condition. We invite you to visit the exhibition, and anticipate an exciting journey into 19th century Singapore.

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Wong Hong Suen has an MA (History of Art) from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. As a curator at NMS since 2001, she has curated temporary exhibitions, permanent exhibits in the Singapore History Gallery and the Food Gallery. Hong Suen is the author of the forthcoming publication *Journey through 19th-Century Singapore: Through Prints and Paintings*. She also wrote *Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore 1942-50* published in 2009 and has written on the social memory of food and colonial photography.

Photos courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore Collection