



Postcard of the National Library, whose red bricks were the inspiration for the walls of the NMS auditorium; photo courtesy of Memories of Singapore

What a Difference a Year Can Make

Singapore 1960 at NMS is a vibrant,
insightful show of Singapore's past

By Shelly Dee



The Merdeka Bridge lost its commemorative pillar and stone lions when the bridge was widened; photo courtesy of NMS

Singapore in 1960. Before HDBs, before Changi Airport, before the PIE and ECP, before mega-malls on one-way Orchard Road. Would you recognise our city of 50 years ago?

On 4 June the National Museum of Singapore opened *Singapore 1960*, a special exhibition that explores the beginnings of a uniquely Singaporean identity against a backdrop of dramatic social, economic and cultural change. The museum will present more than 300 artefacts from Singapore's history. These reveal the beginnings of a distinctive society amid the political rumblings of 1960.

So why was 1960 so important to Singapore's history? According to the then-Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, whose People's Action Party (PAP) had swept to power with a landslide victory in 1959, 1960 was to be a year of consolidation – unlike 1959, which had been a year of decisive change as Singapore became self-governing after almost a century as a British Crown Colony. The 1959 election was the first in which all seats were selected by popular vote. But Singapore was not yet fully independent – the British still controlled the military and foreign relations. Nonetheless, 1960 was the first full year Singapore was a recognised state, and the new government was already calling for a better and brighter future as well as for complete independence through an anticipated merger with Malaya.

There was certainly much to consolidate and improve. In 1960 the population numbered 1.6 million and the per capita income was S\$1,330. (In comparison, today's population is about five million and the per capita income S\$27,500.) Many people lived in squalor in congested areas like Chinatown and in *kampongs* (villages) outside the central district. (Visit the Chinatown Heritage Centre for an idea of what it was like for families to live in dark, windowless cubicles the size of modern bathrooms.) The covered walkways fronting shophouses were noisy public rooms by day and dormitories by night when the homeless slept on makeshift beds of planks and cardboard. Kallang Basin and the Singapore River were open sewers.

The new government wasted no time bringing improvements and also in making modern Singapore a much larger island than it was 50 years ago, thanks to major land reclamation projects that began in the 1960s. (The Esplanade and Suntec City both stand where water lapped in 1960.) But regrettably, significant structures of the 1960s have been lost,

among them the National Library, the National Theatre, the Merdeka Bridge on Nicoll Highway and the popular Orchard Market between Cuppage Road and Koek Road, which provided fresh produce for residents until the mid-1960s. The Balinese-style architecture of the Wisma Atria, which housed the Indonesian Embassy, has been lost but C K Tang Department Store, which opened in 1958, has maintained its distinctive Chinese roof despite demolition and rebuilding several decades ago.

Singapore 1960 transforms the National Museum's gallery into a vibrant 'live' show set complete with news articles and personal stories about merger issues with Malaya as well as two films of the period, *A Day at the Haw Par Villa* and *A Night at the Great World Amusement Park*.

Haw Par Villa, with its kitschy statues of mutilated or dismembered sinners' bodies and other grisly depictions of what happens in the 10 stages of hell, still stands along Pasir Panjang Road, one of Singapore's least known and most unusual tourist attractions. Built in 1937 by the founders of Tiger Balm analgesic ointment to teach traditional Chinese values, the villa and its gardens are famous for the beyond-your-wildest-imagination statues that no doubt terrified many Singaporean children into good behaviour while enlightening them about the culture of their forebears during the Villa's heyday as a theme park in the 1960s.

In the museum exhibit, a romantic black and white musical film shot around 1960 at Haw Par Villa runs continuously. With its stereotypical romantic setting, costumes and music, the film depicts beautiful and exotic young women enjoying themselves in Singapore. At the museum, visitors will also get to see some sexy *sarong kebayas* and part of the fabulous jade collection of Tiger Balm founder Aw Boon Haw.

On the other side of the gallery, *A Night in 1960*, will take you back to the super-popular Great World Amusement Park, which stood on the site of today's Great World City Shopping Centre. One of three nighttime leisure parks (Gay World, Great World, Happy World) that entertained Singaporeans from the 1930s through the 1960s, the park had a humble beginning with 150 wooden shacks offering a variety of entertainment including food, film, Peking Opera, wrestling and boxing matches and of course, gambling. The Shaw Brothers of Shaw Centre, Shaw Towers and Shaw Cinemas fame, bought the already 20 year-old park in 1941. At the time of Singapore's occupation by the Japanese during World War II, the unfortunate park served as a prison for Australian prisoners of war. The Shaws gave it a major facelift in 1958, installing fountains and carnival rides; the grand opening was graced by film star Elizabeth Taylor. Great World and similar parks offering attractions such as cinema, striptease, cabaret, opera, boxing matches, *ronggeng* (social dancing), movies as well as gaming, *wayang* (puppet theatre) and various cultural exhibits and performances were an important part of Singapore nightlife until replaced by television, cineplexes and indoor shopping malls in the 1960s.

In this nighttime part of the exhibit, the 1960s movie *Singapore* plays, showing happy young Singaporeans of different races dressed in traditional *sarong kebaya* as well as fashionable 1960s attire, driving period cars, riding the park's ferris wheel and playing the arcades.

For those who remember Singapore in 1960, this will be an especially meaningful exhibition, perhaps evoking memories of visits to outdoor amusement parks or Orchard Road before mega-malls were built. For the younger generation and newer residents of our island, this exhibition provides a fun and informative introduction to the optimistic yet challenging



Traffic 'jam' along the Singapore River, circa 1960; photo courtesy Angela Mack



A view of the once iconic - now demolished - National Theatre; photo courtesy of NMS



The Singapore 1960 exhibition is screening the film, 'A Day at the Haw Par Villa'; photo courtesy of NMS

period that led to the birth of a new nation. It was a critical period of Singapore's history when the idea of nation-building was still a sub-chapter in the story of the merger with Malaya.

I think this quotation from Singapore's then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in his New Year speech of 1960, sums up the upbeat feeling of the time: "Through hard work, faith and a little good fortune, may 1960 bring more happiness to more of us." No longer ruled by colonial masters, and an upcoming merger with Malaya in the forefront of everyone's thoughts, the Singaporeans of 1960 were optimistic about the prospects ahead of them.

Who would have guessed that just five years later this little island would be an independent country of its own?

Singapore 1960 is on view through 22 August at the National Museum of Singapore.

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