



Veena Jayanth at ACM, guiding the SuperMighty! Heroes of Asia tour; photo courtesy of the ACM

# Guiding Younger Visitors

## When Questions are the Answer

By Jo Wright

"Who thinks museums are boring?" I jokingly ask a group of 13-year-old students at the start of a tour at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). A few brave souls raise their hands amidst a sea of nervous grins.

One of the joys of guiding students is showing them that a museum can be inspirational, interesting and also fun. Imagine my excitement at hearing one initially hesitant student proudly announce after a tour, "I'm going to bring my mum and dad to show them what I've seen today!" That's all the reward a volunteer guide needs.

Last year 240 FOM-trained docents guided more than 13,000 students around five Singapore museums. Those numbers will increase as plans requiring Singapore students to visit two museums a year are implemented.

The increase in student visitors has caused FOM to retool its docent training to include student guiding activities and workshops as well as hands-on student guiding practice. In addition, each museum has a student guiding group that not only leads student tours but also helps create them.

For example, in conjunction with the ACM's *SuperMighty! Heroes of Asia* special exhibition, a group of docents devised a tour for under-10-year-olds that not only utilised the exhibition theme but also included many artefacts from the permanent collection. The tours incorporated story-telling and imagination games to enhance student interactivity.

"A good story is powerful. Students of all ages love the tales of Sang Kancil, the clever mousedeer from Indonesian and Malaysian folklore," says Virginia Sheridan, one of the creators of the *SuperMighty!* tours, which emphasized that the students themselves could be heroes by studying, or helping others in their community.

The average age of the typical museum-going student used to be 14 years. Now preschool, primary and even younger students as well as those with special needs have been following docent-led tours. "We have an opportunity to make the preschoolers' first museum visit so positive that they will want to return again and again," says ACM docent Jacqueline Thng.

Singapore Art Museum (SAM) docents focus on teaching students how to *really* look at and analyse a work of art. Sometimes, the students teach the docents how to 'see' art. SAM docent Diana Meister shares the story of a seven-year-old student who was insistent that he could see people in a watercolour. Unknown to Diana, the artist had hidden figures of people in the picture and the child was standing in exactly the right place to see them. "Working with students can be a real and also humbling experience," Diana adds.

Along with Uma Seshadri, Diana helped train students to lead their peers for the Singapore Biennale exhibition, held from March to May this year. "Having to explain tricky concepts to their classmates is a great way for students to test their own understanding," explained Uma. "It helps them gain confidence with public-speaking and gets them to think on their feet."

At the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI), a 'hands-on' approach is preferred. Docents there have been working with the museum's education department to develop student tours and workshops with a difference. Students are given the chance to plunge their hands into paper pulp, to handle silk-screens and to feel the different textures of engraving plates, which helps them to understand the various processes involved in papermaking and printing.



Virginia Sheridan guiding students at ACM; photo by Jo Wright

“Children learn in different ways,” explains Lori Riseman, an STPI docent. “If we start using their other senses, we can reach out and engage more students in what we do here.”

How was water stored in a Peranakan house? How many pins were used to make a bridal head-dress? Students

visiting the Peranakan Museum (TPM) learn the answers to these and many more questions via a quiz developed by the student programmes team. “Relevant questions engage students and help them remember what they have seen,” says TPM docent Miriam Weinlich. Peranakan culture is featured in the Singapore school syllabus, so TPM guides have already seen their student numbers increase.

Poh Lip Hang at the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) agrees that questions are the answer. He and an enthusiastic team of fellow docents have been developing a list of student-engaging questions that tie in with the Ministry of Education’s history syllabus. “It’s all about making their visit to the museum relevant and bringing the artefacts to life,” he enthuses.

Earlier this year, Pompeii came to life for 1,800 local and international school students guided by special research group docents through NMS’ special exhibition *Pompeii: Life in a Roman Town 79CE*. They had the tricky task of adapting their tours to students with diverse needs, ranging from those completely unfamiliar with the theme, to those who could read and translate the Latin inscriptions. Lynn Biondi, one of the many docents who guided Pompeii, said that the students were full of questions and sometimes full of giggles – especially around one particular bronze statue of Bacchus.

And with that, she ‘exposed’ one of the great truths of guiding students: the need to interest as well as educate them. In the process, docents hope to encourage a life-long love of museums and perhaps inspire the young visitors of today to become the FOM guides of tomorrow.

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*Jo Wright is a docent at ACM and loves guiding students. She enjoys telling stories in the museum to children of all ages.*

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Catherine MacMeekin guiding students at ACM; photo courtesy of the ACM