



Quintessence

The Element from which Heavenly Things are Made

By Sandra Berrick

The chapel

Quintessence: the very epitome of that word can be seen when you visit the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Climb to the second floor, ignore the arrows and signs to the galleries and slip into the former chapel – now deconsecrated and used as an auditorium. In front of you a window seems to float in the air and is most definitely made of the same substance as angels, seraphim and cherubim.

This beautiful window is there almost by accident. A traditional stained-glass window was installed when the chapel was added (in 1903) to the original 1857 structure. It had the usual complement of saints and coloured glass and was much admired by the staff and students of St. Joseph's Institution (SJI) until just before the Japanese conquest of Singapore in 1942. The school was then being used for British military purposes and a bomb had fallen into the courtyard – but fortunately had not exploded. Fearing that the building would be destroyed in the bombing raids, the precious window was taken down and safely hidden. Alas, it was such a safe place that it has never been found.

The wall remained unadorned, bricked up until 1995 when the National Heritage Board took over the building and transformed it into an art gallery. The question was – do we replace the window with a similar traditional stained-

glass window or do we commission a work of art? They chose the latter alternative. A wise decision, in my opinion.

In 1996 the stunning *Quintessence* made by Ramon Orlina, a Philippine artist, was installed and for me has become an essential part of my docent tour, where the public invariably shares my admiration and enjoyment.

When entering the room you can't miss the gorgeous window, glowing in shades of soft aqua-turquoise with dozens of little rainbows projected onto the floor, if you're lucky enough to be there when the sun is shining through. When you walk towards it you realise that the light and depth of colour is formed by the varying thickness and faceting of the glass. Standing directly below, you look up and marvel at the strength and vigour of what at first sight appeared to be hanging insubstantially.

Ramon Orlina used discarded glass from a factory in Manila. He recycled scraps of glass unsuitable for window panes owing to their faults and imperfections. The glass manufacturer was happy to have these rejects taken away. If you look closely at the pieces he has faceted and assembled, you can see the blemishes that made the raw materials unsuitable for utilitarian use, but made them ideal for becoming a stunning work of art. Ironic, really.



Tiles complex and simple

There is so much more to enjoy and appreciate and be surprised by in this relatively small space. Look down at your feet and observe the beautiful, original late-19th century tiles. One luxurious pattern is used as though it were a carpet leading down the aisle to where the altar would have been, spreading across the room's end. The other pattern is more modest – under the pews. Similar tile patterns could be seen all across the British Empire during that period. Next time you travel to Australia or New Zealand or India look at the floors or verandahs of the grand as well as domestic buildings and you'll see what I mean.

Look up to the ceiling and you'll see an example of delicate decoration formed not by elaborate plaster work, but by white-painted, pressed tin from the Malayan tin mines – an export that made the empire rich. Around the walls of the room you'll see more pressed tin, also painted white to resemble moulding. The patterns used are contemporary with the Art Nouveau decorative design, then the latest modern art style. Alas, tin is delicate and prone to rusting, so it is constantly repainted to preserve it, which overwhelms the pattern and will one day make it very difficult to distinguish.

When the decision was taken to transform SJI into an art museum, many decisions had to be made regarding preservation versus transformation. You can't showcase contemporary art in old classrooms and administrative offices, but neither should you destroy the beauty of a heritage building by gutting it. Compromise is the order of the day. And that's what's happened with the former chapel. The colours are those the boys of SJI will recognise. The window is new, but we still see the bas-relief sculptures high up on the walls all around the room. These religious depictions are in virtually every Catholic church built since the 16th century. They are used to help church members make a spiritual pilgrimage of prayer, through meditating upon depictions of the last hours of Jesus' life.

Elsewhere in the building you will see this desire to preserve the beauty and history of the old combined with the need to showcase the modern and the contemporary. The necessity to preserve the art with climate control doesn't interfere with the integrity of the building. Internal glass walls form a shell, just centimetres inside the edge of the open verandahs; visitors are hardly aware of them as they pass along the corridors. On one side are the strong arches of traditional colonial 'public building' architecture and on the other are the tall, painted shutters which would have been open to the fresh air, allowing the boys in their classrooms some cross-ventilation in the tropical heat.



Tiles with rainbow



Corridors with shutters and glass inner shell



Pressed tin moulding in art nouveau style

A final story about the SJI chapel. Money was collected in 1903 to pay for the building extension, which included this delicate gem of a chapel. You can see a list of the major donors on a pillar as you leave the building and walk under the balcony porch towards the street. There you will see some famous and historical names, people of many backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities and companies from far and wide, all trading in the busy port of Singapore. My favourite is the donation from the Opium and Spirit Farm. I smile when I think that the chapel was built, in part, with proceeds from the drug and alcohol trade!

Sandra Berrick is an FOM member and docent at SAM. Her artistic passions include painting in watercolour and oils, and photography.

Photos courtesy of the author