

# National Museum of Singapore

## Sculptures at the National Museum

By Victoria Ford

Pedas Pedas by Kumari Nahappan

What have 20 tonnes of granite, a set of swinging chandeliers and a giant chilli have in common? Well, they are all to be found in or outside the National Museum of Singapore. When I revisited them I discovered surprising connections and saw them as symbolic markers of Singapore.

On the museum's front lawn, one is greeted by the row of six ridged blocks of granite with a smaller one at each end. Entitled *20 Tonnes*, this work was first exhibited in the atrium of the MICA building in 2002 and was later acquired by the National Museum. Then in 2004 it was installed on the museum's front lawn.



*20 Tonnes by Han Sai Por*

The granite looks so elemental, simple and raw. It is interesting that the artist, Han Sai Por, did not carve elaborate designs or shapes into the stone. She worked the granite just enough to open it to the elements and changes in the light and weather.

Another of her works (*Seeds*) is also outside the museum, comprising two giant kernels. They are a wonderful example of Han Sai Por's organic structures, created from sandstone extracted from Fort Canning's depths when the museum's extension works were carried out in 2006. This connection of granite and sandstone leads me to think about the fragment of the Singapore Stone deep in the museum's history gallery. It once stood at the mouth of the Singapore River sending messages out to ancient travellers. Is *20 Tonnes* our Singapore Stone? Will it still be here long after we have all moved on?

Inside, installed on the link bridge to the new extension, is a mesmerising display – a row of eight red chandeliers (*Contours of a Rich Manoeuvre*), swinging through the air like the pendulum of a clock. Created by Australia-based Singaporean artist, Suzann Victor, they fascinate visitors with their many rhythms and patterns.

They can be many things to visitors... "a giant ticking clock" said one, "a huge executive toy" said another. However, for me the chandeliers are at their most beautiful when you catch their reflection in the big window opposite. Then they look like two huge dragons, one auspicious red and the other a bright white light, dancing and intertwining

in some hypnotic rhythm. To me, this recalls a turn-of-the-century Singapore with its colonial masters, their local counterparts and the complicated relationships in this new and exciting colony.

Crossing the bridge, one sees the museum changing identities, from old to new. The light and airy atrium highlights the modernity of present-day Singapore, with artwork and bold lettering shouting its identity and maturity as a nation. The chilli pepper, *Pedas Pedas*, on the lawn at the back of the museum, is one such piece.

This iconic sculpture, created by the Singapore-based conceptual artist, Kumari Nahappan, was commissioned by the National Museum in 2006. Standing almost four metres in height, it is a bronze sculpture with a red wax patina.

It is a wonderfully organic and tactile sculpture – it makes you want to go and look and touch it. You find yourself admiring something as ordinary as a chilli and appreciating its shape, colour and texture. The artist has said that she feels chillies hold tremendous power and energy, which belie their modest size. Was she talking about chillies or about Singapore itself, small, but powerful and influential?

Kumari uses chillies as inspiration because she feels that they are something that almost all cultures use in some form. This seems to echo present-day Singapore's rich blend of many cultures all enriching society with their customs, cuisine and artwork.

Take a stroll through the National Museum, view or review these wonderful artworks and the history gallery, bursting with amazing characters and fantastic stories and make your own surprising connections!



*Contours of a Rich Manoeuvre by Suzann Victor*

**Victoria Ford** has lived in Singapore for two years. She is a docent for the National Museum and a member of its current training team.

All photos from the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.