

# A History of Singapore in Seven Objects

Inspiration for this collection of seven articles came from the BBC Radio 4 broadcasts and book by Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. MacGregor, the Director of the British Museum, notes, "telling history is what museums are for", so we have selected objects from six museums to tell the story of Singapore. Last year, *PASSAGE* featured a series on the history of the museum buildings; this year it's the turn of artefacts on display in these museums. We begin with the very early history of this island and a small lead statue of a horse and rider found near the Singapore River, now displayed in the National Museum. Customs such as ceremonial mask-wearing were common throughout this region in the pre-colonial era, as seen in the *hudoq* masks in the Asian Civilisations Museum. The colonial era is represented by the wonderful drawings commissioned by Singapore's first Resident, William Farquhar. Around the turn of the century, Singapore began its steady progress towards multiculturalism when immigrants came to work and settle here. Among them were the Straits-born Peranakans, who brought their colourful wedding customs. As Singapore began its march towards self-government, a scroll written by Dr Sun Yat Sen represented nationalism and the nascent ideas of nationhood. With independence came the beginnings of a national art scene typified by the paintings of Liu Kang. Finally, the contemporary era is represented by the works of Singapore-based print artist Hong Zhu An, at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

## The Headless Horseman of Singapore

By John Miksic

A unique statue was discovered between the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and the Singapore River during an excavation in May 1998. It was found at a depth of 1.5 metres, in Layer Four of the site, which also contained dense remains of shells, coral and animal bone. Artefacts in this layer included porcelain and stoneware from China, Thailand and Vietnam, dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, various types of earthenware, Chinese coins, three glass artefacts (two fragments of two bangles and a shard of a container similar to others found at Fort Canning), a bronze projectile point and a metal statue.

The statue measures 59 mm long, 55 mm high, 3 mm thick, and weighs 52 grams. It stands on a flat base 18 mm wide. The man on the horse wears a sarong that stops at his knees, no shirt, and a necklace. His two hands hold a stick, which may once have had something at its tip. The horse has a complex bridle and harness and more straps on its back. The mane is clearly depicted. The horse has a saddle and wings, leading us to deduce that the man on the horse's back must have been a very special person.

During conservation work by Dean Sully, who then worked for the National Heritage Board, the metal was analysed and found to be lead. This was very surprising; no lead statue from the ancient period had ever been found in Southeast Asia. Lead is found in several places in Sumatra and was an important trade commodity at that time. Interestingly, the *Belitung* and *Pulau Buaya* wrecks, found not



The lead horse, photo courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore

far from Singapore, carried many lead ingots.

Who is the person depicted? There are several possibilities. The Sun God, Surya, is frequently portrayed riding a horse in 14<sup>th</sup> century Javanese temple carvings, for example, at Candi Bangkal. Others include princely figures known as *Panji*.

The figure of a winged horse plays an important role in Singapore. According to the Raffles MS18 version of the *Malay Annals*, Singapore's legendary founder, Sang Nila Utama, was born after his father Raja Chulan spent some time with a princess who lived beneath the sea. When Raja Chulan returned to land from the sea, he was riding a

winged stallion called the 'Horse of the River'. Raja Chulan asked his scholars and craftsmen to make a monument to record his journey to the depths. They split a rock in two and wrote the story in "the Hindustani language". Then they put treasures including gold, silver and precious stones into the rock. Raja Chulan prophesied that one of his descendants would become a prince, "make all lands below the wind subject to him," and gain this treasure. The 'stone split in two' might refer to the Singapore Stone, a split boulder found at the mouth of the Singapore River with an inscription on one side, near the spot where the statue was found. It is tempting to relate the legend to this famous artefact.

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