

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

By Ann Richardson

The National Museum of Singapore (NMS) is possibly best known for the Singapore History Gallery and its diverse special exhibitions. However, there is also a remarkable collection of William Farquhar's natural history drawings in the Goh Seng Choo Gallery, together with four compelling Living Galleries. The latter galleries focus on Singapore's commonplace material artefacts under the broad themes of Food, Fashion, Film and Wayang, and Photography. Initially, when the museum reopened at the end of 2006, there were some reservations about the relevance of these Living Galleries. In particular it was felt that there was no place in a national museum for the mundane, be it a collection of kitchen utensils (Food), images of bridal parties (Photography), rolls of brilliantly coloured fabric (Fashion) or film publicity posters (Film and Wayang). Nearly six years on, these galleries are now intrinsic to the museum and offer the visitor opportunities to explore themes and topics which are thought-provoking but easy to identify with.

The Photography Gallery, one of my favourite Living Galleries, is a case in point. While the main leitmotif is the development of the Singapore family since the 1930s, the images reveal other equally fascinating sub-themes including kinship, social reform, multiculturalism and multiracialism. Immediately after entering the gallery (which, like all the Living Galleries is divided into two sections) the visitor will view a photograph of a young woman with strikingly short dark hair and very fair skin, dressed in a Victorian robe created from Malay *songket* (hand-woven silk or cotton brocade): the Sultana Khadija, Turkish-born fourth wife of the anglophile Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor (who married her in 1893 when he was 60). The Sultana spent most of her short life in a mansion in Tyersall Avenue, on the west side of the Botanic Gardens. This image succinctly underlines the blending of cultural practices that describes much of Singapore's cultural heritage, as well as the close historical



Sultana Khadija

ties that have long connected Singapore with Johor.

A very different story lies behind the image of two Japanese women (taken before 1912). These women were *Karayuki-san* – young women from very poor families who came to Singapore to work legally as prostitutes during the Meiji-Taisho Period (1868-1926). Although the women are beautifully dressed, their poignant, resigned expressions hint at the hardships that defined much of their lives.

Then there is the photograph of the well-known Peranakan philanthropist and businessman, Tan Jiak Kim (whose hearse can be viewed in the Singapore History Gallery). Mr Tan married three times: his first wife died in childbirth; he then married her sister who died en route to the United Kingdom. Subsequently he married the third and youngest sister, with whom he is photographed. Interestingly, the children in the photograph are his wife's nephews (who as a consequence of her marriage to their father also became her stepsons).



Japanese Karayuki-san

An elegant 1914 wedding party photograph recalls the uniting of two prominent Armenian families, the Hacobians and Martins. Along with creating well-known icons like the Raffles Hotel and Singapore's national flower (the Vanda Miss Joaquim), members of these prominent families also co-founded the Straits Times newspaper and owned land in Tanglin (where you will find St Martin's Drive).



Tan Jiak Kim with his third wife, Ang Geok Lan, and his two sons



Armenian couple, friends and family, 1914, collection of the National Archives of Singapore

There is a small hall that connects the two sections of the Photography Gallery. On one wall are some images of well-known members of late 19th and early 20th century Singapore society, including the Jumabhoy and Haw Par families. Not to be missed is a photograph of two key members of the Singapore Tong Meng Hui (Revolutionary Alliance): the handsome 'pineapple king', Lim Nee Soon (after whom the new town Yishun is named) and his friend Wang Jingwei.

The rear section of the gallery is designed to resemble an old photographer's studio. Apart from an engaging collection of images and objects, the gallery also contains some remarkable original photographs like the 1844 daguerreotype of Boat Quay and the Singapore River (one of the earliest photographs of Singapore), which can be found in one of the heavy drawers that light up when opened. This part of the gallery also invites the visitor to sit, relax and browse through albums of photographs, some by Singaporean Willie Phua, one of the photojournalists who, in 1989, captured that enduring image of the solitary man trying to prevent Chinese tanks from entering Tiananmen Square.



Lim Nee Soon and Wang Jinwei (seated)

Lastly, before leaving of this section of the gallery, the visitor should take a minute to look at the specially commissioned wooden installation on the ceiling. Observe the shadow cast on the wall; perhaps there is a suggestion of a chandelier or Chinese lantern. This 21st century artefact, conceivably based on a 19th century colonial icon, subtly reminds us that history and heritage are as much about individual interpretation as about supposedly objective facts.



Willie Phua with his Ariflex camera, in the early 60s

As the saying goes 'a picture is worth a thousand words', so if you are planning a visit to the National Museum, do think about including the Photography Gallery in your programme.

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All photos courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore