

The Peranakan World Goes to South Korea

This spring, Singapore is taking the Peranakan story to East Asia for the first time. This travelling exhibition of over 200 objects from the Peranakan Museum, supplemented by loans from local collectors, will be on display at the National Museum of Korea from 19 March to 19 May. The show follows the successful 2010 exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, which the Peranakan Museum also presented.

The exhibition tells the fascinating story of how Chinese and Malays intertwined their lives to create a unique fusion of cultures along the Straits of Malacca and also in the Indonesian archipelago. Chinese, Malay and European influences on Peranakan culture are highlighted in selected artefacts, many of which date from this ethnic group's Golden Age around the turn of the 20th century.

Bridal clothes from turn-of-the-century Malacca show Chinese fashion at its most sumptuous. The bride's intricate ensemble includes a robe, two skirts, two forearm attachments, a five-layered cape and four tie-like hangings bedecked with the auspicious Chinese motifs of phoenixes, peonies and butterflies. The groom's black Mandarin robe with a rank badge and conical hat is also in the Chinese style, although the beaded collar gives it a Malay touch. This ornate ensemble was just one of many worn by a bridal couple during the course of the 12-day wedding celebrations.

Along with traditional Chinese beliefs and symbols, Peranakans retained many aspects of Malay culture. The region's influence on fashion can be seen in standout artefacts like the star-shaped brooch from early 20th century Penang. It is set with 93 brilliant-cut diamonds, representing the then state-of-the-art technology. Intriguingly, the central element is detachable, suggesting



Peranakan bride and groom ensembles, Malacca, late 19th or early 20th century, Peranakan Museum

possible uses ranging from a cuff-link to part of a *kerosang* set, used to fasten a woman's *kebaya*, or tunic.

Another section of the exhibition highlights European influences, particularly on a westernised elite. A fascinating example of this cultural *mélange* is the 1936 portrait of Sir Song Ong Siang, by the German painter Julius Wentscher. In addition to his work as a historian of the Chinese in Singapore, Song fought to reform practices such as opium-smoking and foot-binding and was knighted by the British. In the portrait, Sir Song is pictured sitting in a Chinese chair with his hand resting near a Bible, a nod to both his ethnic roots and his Christian convictions.

As Dr Alan Chong, Director of both the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum explains, "We are proud to present Peranakan art and culture to audiences in Korea. Peranakan art is an important example of multi-cultural contact which reveals Singapore as a multi-cultural state, formed by centuries of trade, immigration and colonial networks." The exhibition's stunning display of Straits artistry is certain to charm and delight visitors in Seoul, as it has in Singapore.



Star brooch (*kerosang bintang*), Penang, early 20th century, gold, diamonds, Asian Civilisations Museum

Article adapted from a press release issued by the Peranakan Museum.