

Junking in Singapore – Part II

By Shalini Mukerji

Trawling through dinky shops for ‘once upon a time in Singapore’, I’ve discovered intriguing Singaporean pastimes and learned about a demand for artefacts that reveals sentimental lapses on the part of Singaporeans, although friends of mine joke about how *kiasu* they are!

With considerable pride, Michael C Poh demonstrated how the ice *kachang* (literally red bean ice) machine in his shop works. “Ice shavers are now electric, but this is how it was done, manually, with one guy working the handle so you got shaved ice that was so fine, it melted beautifully on your first bite!” He also scattered a handful of animal-shaped, neon-coloured plastic pieces on the table and told me, “In the 60s and 70s, people played *kuti kuti*. You could be just two players sitting around and still have fun playing. You had to flip your token onto your opponent’s and if it landed on his piece, you took it. You won if you had the most tokens. These are not really antiques, more vintage. For something to be antique, it needs to be at least 100 years old. How many 100-year-old items will you find here?”



Michael Poh with the ice kachang machine



Chinese iron - a 100-year-old top-open iron

His basement shop in the Fook Hai Building, a few steps across from the Sook Ching memorial in South Bridge Road, has glass cabinets with embroidered slippers, filigreed silver belts and brooches and Nonyaware, shelves on which I spied a Van Houten glass jar printed with Arabic, Chinese and Tamil scripts on the different sides, Chinese water pipes, silver leaf-shaped hooks to hang mosquito nets from or to gather curtains, wire baskets for eggs, enamel

coffee containers from which hawkers on bicycles sold piping hot coffee, a 100-year-old top-open iron, kerosene lamps, a 100-year-old wooden frieze with *qilin* (a mythical creature) and phoenix motifs, as well as old F & N bottles and glasses. “I stock a wide range, not just one or two types of pieces,” was



Kuti kuti pieces

how Michael described his collection, one that marries art and the everyday, the antique and pop culture, “Singapore has a lot of histories, so how can I limit myself? You see, pre-war when Singapore was not so developed, war-time, Straits Chinese and all that, but Singapore history is also vintage retro.”

When I stopped by Haji Badman bin Johari’s chaotically stacked Changi Junk Store in Joo Chiat, which he started in 1972, he showed off the exquisitely engraved bases of the bamboo birdcages in his collection. Drawing attention to their carved motifs in ivory and bone and their different shapes, he explained, “Each bird has a different cage. If you put the wrong bird in the wrong cage, people will laugh at you... I have four cats at home, so I don’t keep birds, just a bulbul in the shop.”



Bird cage with ivory carvings, for baby birds



Haji Badman bin Johari with cricket box



Haji Badman bin Johari with 700-year-old bowl

He pulled out a box in bamboo weave in which fighting crickets were once kept, and estimated that it was over a 100 years old. He valued this the most highly from among other precariously piled curios in the ill-lit recesses of his ground-floor shophouse: 120-year-old clocks that still keep time, 100-year-old Nonya armchairs, a U-legged dining table from the 1950s, a 1920s dressing table (“from a house where the Robinsons shopping centre is now”), massive carvings that form part of a Chinese altar, an old safe from England, a silver ice bucket with a dragon carving, the complete smoking set for an opium bed and some lovingly handled porcelain. As he catalogued the porcelain in his collection, he sounded like a monk chanting, “500-year-old Ming dynasty bowl, 1,000-year-old Song dynasty bowl for opium or maybe medicine, a Qing dynasty incense burner, early Qing dynasty blue glazed plates...” He knocked on a bowl to prove how superior his bowls are over ‘fakes’, and smiled while the air resonated as if a temple bell had been rung.

Shalini Mukerji is an independent writer, who enjoys exploring Singapore’s stories for *PASSAGE*.