



Pia, an experienced docent, guiding Abha and friends Andrea and Lorena at the ACM.

## New Crop of ACM Docents

By Abha Kaul

## of ACM Docents

*Last September, sixty of us eager trainees set aside our Tuesday mornings to embark on a fairly intensive training program that featured weekly readings and lectures on the history, art, religions, philosophies and cultures of Asia.*

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It took me eight years to finally make a commitment and just do it. My recent completion of a six-month docent training course (for museum guides) at the gorgeous Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) is for me a freshly realized dream. While I wonder why I didn't do it earlier, I'm glad I used my time in Singapore to read, study, and learn more about Asia as I went about pursuing various related interests. Frequent travels in the region and back home to India during this period only served to strengthen my foundation and pique my curiosity further to check out and benefit from this master's level type of short course in understanding Asia. It seemed too good an offer held out by Friends of the Museum (FOM), a volunteer organization that runs similar programs for three other museums.

Last September, sixty of us eager trainees set aside our Tuesday mornings to embark on a fairly intensive training program that featured weekly readings and lectures on the history, art, religions, philosophies and cultures of Asia. Readings were culled from authoritative texts of scholars and curators; lectures were delivered by experts – professors, historians and writers. Some were naturally more gripping than others. Divided into six cozy groups of ten each, we also savored practical activities in the galleries, acquainted ourselves with a dazzling array of artifacts, absorbed tips on general guiding skills, and headed off on field trips to relevant destinations in Singapore. It was fortunate that we had two terrific group leaders looking out for us every step of the way!

We learned about the history and significance of the ACM building and enjoyed spending time at these erstwhile colonial government offices established at the mouth of the humble Singapore River to commemorate the spot where Sir Stamford Raffles landed and spurred the development of modern Singapore. Beautifully renovated, this grand old building at Empress Place, across the

river from the Fullerton Hotel and Boat Quay, opened as the sparkling new ACM in March, 2003, reminding locals and visitors of the various cross-cultural influences that came together over centuries from East and West to this crossroad we now call home. There could scarcely be a more magnificent location for such a museum.

So what does the ACM actually have that fascinated us all? Four galleries that tell brilliant stories of founding ancestors and of myriad influences that took root in Singapore – from Southeast Asia (at the heart of which we are situated), West Asia (whence came Islam, a culture shared by many neighboring countries), China (the motherland of forefathers to more than 75% of Singaporeans), to South Asia (whose pan-Indian culture lives on here and in many parts of Asia). Multicultural and inclusive to the core!

We learned to know artifacts intimately so they could speak to us, and museum visitors, of this rich past and help us uncover present connections at the same time. Whether dated from thousands of years BCE (before Common Era) in pottery remains, or as recently as 2007 in a contemporary painting, each artifact has much to teach us about – the provenance, the style, the material, the function, the technology, the symbolism, the craft and artistry, the artist, the message. Above all, sheer visual beauty and drama that art objects provide is a reward unto itself. One's imagination is truly fired. Themes we covered include the Bronze Age, the "Indianization" of Southeast Asia, hill and island tribes, trade and travel, Chinese Emperors, the literati, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Malay Sultans, calligraphy, performing arts, jewelry, temple architecture, silk, porcelain and so much more. This is simply to give readers a taste of the diverse subjects delved into.

Yes, we sure worked hard digesting all the material from various sources, and after "studying" each gallery, we

prepared a five-minute oral presentation on an assigned section and a fifteen-minute written paper highlighting themes and art of our choice but within clear guidelines. All trainee work is evaluated by the training team. The course ended with a flourish – a live and lively demonstration of Chinese Opera and a lovely catered rooftop lunch at the ACM. We had to first turn in a final paper written to form the basis of a one-hour tour of the entire museum that we shall now begin to offer to the public as we are required to do for a year hereafter.

Was it worth it? Valuable? Absolutely! Do I regret giving up other things to gain the knowledge and insights that I now have access to? Not one bit. As my wise mother used to say, "No pain, no gain." Not that it was painful, just a bit demanding. Some of us are life-long students with a chronic habit. With certainty I can say that I thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of this course. Trainees sign up for several reasons – to enhance their knowledge of Asia, to meet interesting personalities from all over the world, to hone their public-speaking skills or simply to strike up friendships.

I have to end by declaring that the course exceeded my expectations. The entire training team did a splendid job of pulling it off with grace – scheduling, organizing and communicating are no mean feats. I deepened my knowledge of Asia, further stoked my love for history, language and world cultures, and got to know many wonderful, talented and intelligent women whom I relate to even better now as a result of our common "mission" – the endeavor to become competent and fun docents. This training program is heartily recommended for anyone. All you need is the interest, an open mind and the commitment. If it's for you, try not to take eight years.

*Abha likes any excuse to write; a lifelong history student, she is currently happiest finding links in Asian cultures and is now co-head of the ACM Docent Training Team.*



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**Are YOU interested in becoming a volunteer Museum Guide at one of these museums...**

- Asian Civilisations Museum
- National Museum of Singapore
- The Peranakan Museum
- Singapore Art Museum

Docent training begins September 2009. All programs include readings and lectures on Asian history and culture, museum-specific training, general guiding skills and field trips to destinations in Singapore.

**To find out more, come to the Public Information Meeting**

**Tuesday, May 19  
9:45 am - 12 noon  
National Museum of Singapore  
Gallery Theatre  
93 Stamford Road**

**For further information:**

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