

# The Highs and Lows of Guiding at the ACM

By Soumya Ayer, Carolyn Pottinger, Jo Wright

Guiding at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) can be challenging, but very rewarding. Docents could be involved in highlight tours, student tours, gallery tours, Gallery-in-Focus tours, special exhibitions, children’s season, study tours, Monday Morning Lectures and new gallery openings. In short, there is plenty to keep ACM docents on their toes. Sometimes it can seem overwhelming, however, it is very satisfying when visitors appreciate what you do and discover that history can be exciting. In this article three experienced docents share the highs and lows of guiding at the ACM.

**Soumya Ayer:** The highlight for me was the opening weekend of the first-ever children’s season in 2014, when Story Whisperer Tours were created. Having just graduated from the training programme I had the opportunity to work with a team of experienced docents. Of course I was a bag of nerves by the time opening weekend arrived. Telling stories to a packed room of children and parents under the Tree of Life was incredible. We guided 1,000 visitors that weekend, but that was not all, we met President Tony Tan and had our picture taken with him. There have been other rewarding experiences. Having the opportunity to be Co-head of Training was a challenging responsibility, but one that allowed me to make many lasting friendships. I particularly enjoy the special exhibitions when I get the opportunity to be in the company of some amazing artefacts, learn from others and share what I learn with visitors. The ACM has been truly transformative for me and joining the docent group is one of the best decisions I have made.



Stone Carving of Shiva Nataraja

heavenly satisfaction comes when you have the perfect artefact before you. I guided a group of physicists in Singapore for a seminar. Looking jet-lagged and as if that they had not come by choice, I knew that engaging them might prove challenging, but Shiva Nataraja sprang to my rescue. The metaphor of this Hindu God’s cosmic dance, in which he sets out to destroy the entire universe so life can be regenerated, carries so much resonance with the work at the Hadron Collider in Switzerland, that the Indian government presented the research facility with a large bronze Nataraja statue. With our wonderful art and ancient Asian mythology assuming a surprising relevance to my visitors, we went on to spend a happy hour together.

**Jo Wright:** “Oooh, is that an underglaze design on these bowls?” asked the VIP guest, eagerly leaning forward for a closer look. He then dropped to his knees to examine their undersides, declaring excitedly that you can learn as much from the footings (the rim at the bottom of the bowl) as you can from the decoration. His excitement was infectious



Jo Wright

and soon we were all kneeling on the floor, gazing up at the artefacts from an entirely new viewpoint. We were in the ACM’s Tang Shipwreck gallery and the VIP was Gavin Williamson, the UK Secretary of State for Defence, in town on business. How did he know about the ACM? At a meeting in London earlier this year, Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister, Teo Chee Hean, had recommended that he visit. Mr Williamson’s interest in ceramics comes from his many years working in the UK bone china industry. He certainly gave me a new perspective on the gallery’s 1,200-year-old pieces. Later, I was thrilled to be presented with a bone china mug made in the UK, ideal for sipping my afternoon tea.

One of the joys of guiding is that you can never really tell how your audience will react to what you show them. Government ministers, visiting physicists or seven-year-old children, each brings his/her own viewpoint. It’s an absolute privilege to be able to make this happen and we are indeed fortunate to be FOM docents and guiding at the ACM.



Story Whisperers group

**Carolyn Pottinger:** As a newly minted docent, I had a seven-year-old looking me in the eye and crisply informing me that he didn’t want to be there and that he much preferred Greek myths. On the other hand, a moment of

---

**Soumya Ayer, Jo Wright and Carolyn Pottinger** have been docents for between four and nine years at the ACM where they have guided well over 1,000 tours and around 12,000 visitors. They all agree that the joy of being museum docents comes from the guiding itself and from being part of a warm and fascinating community of FOM docents.

---