

## **A Closed Oyster Never Stopped a Determined Docent**

*By Heike Bredenkamp*

It opened as quickly as it closed.

Right before the circuit breaker measures were introduced, in light of Covid-19, the new Jewellery Gallery at the ACM unlocked its gems to the world.

Like a shy oyster it quickly had to shut again, hiding the splendour and stories that lay twinkling and beckoning inside.

As the saying goes, or at least it should: A closed oyster never stopped a determined docent!

And so, with research pliers in one hand and tools to cut through information in the other, more than 30 docents embarked on a journey to encounter the enchanted world of heritage jewellery.

The docents reappeared bedecked in crowns, hairpins and combs, bracelets, amulets and earrings. Knowledge, necklaces, brooches and belts weighed them down – but in a happy way. For what was acquired was wisdom of the deep-rooted symbolism of the predominantly island Southeast Asian jewellery on show, and an insight into the protection, power, wealth and status that are the unseen elements of each piece.



Docents put forward their golden nuggets of information via a virtual “soapbox” at the end of May. Their descriptions of pieces ranged from a field of golden flowers to flowers that look like feet, from eating heirloom jewellery to placing a 75-carat money belt around the waist, from saddle shaped rings to a necklace for a horse, and from modesty plates to hair combs that signify a marriageable age.



The attending docents heard about cultures where wife-giving families were superior to wife-taking families, and myths of crocodile husbands kidnapping brides. There were also stories of how working with metal was considered spiritually dangerous and jewellery that was bathed in coconut cream. In addition there were lively accounts of adorned weapons, empresses, sultans and a phoenix taking flight.

Some of the jewellery shown resembled the sun, the moon and the stars, and a few took design inspiration from rice paddy fields, buffalo horns, and tadpoles kicking each other!



The jewellery stretched from a century old to more than 2,200 years old. Made by men and women artists, the collection captures the fine artistry found in both male and female ornaments. A highlight for young and old is an amulet made from a tiger's tooth and worn by children for protection.

Listening to the narratives whilst dogs barked neighbourhood lullabies and appointments at doctor's rooms were met, it became apparent – in between sips of hot tea and bites of biscuits – the virtual platform could remain the way forward for soapboxes, as the number of docents attending the soapbox is not limited to gallery size or docent location. The 79 docents who attended illustrated this, and not all were currently in Singapore. Also, everyone had a front row seat, bench or chair – giving all an equal opportunity to appreciate the details and hear about the objects, before viewing the collection in all its priceless beauty in the gallery.

Virtually, the docent soapbox has been raised. As another saying goes, or it should: Docents always look on the bling side of life!