

PASSAGE

Friends of the Museums Singapore

November / December 2018



40TH
Anniversary
—1978-2018—



Friends
of the Museums
Singapore



Boreo's Antioch Owl

Dear Friends,

This is my last 'Dear Friends' letter for *PASSAGE*. I took on the role of president in December 2015 and have had the privilege of holding this position for the last three years. It is now time to hand the mantle over to a new president. During my term in office, I was fortunate to have worked with many wonderful volunteers, all of whom impressed me with their desire to serve and are fully committed to FOM's cause.

The recent FOM40 celebration on 1 October is one such example. The organising committee and sub-committees led by Sadiyah Shahal worked hard when planning every detail of the event, from generating ideas, to the logistical arrangements and to design layouts. A few days before the actual event, a group of volunteers gathered in the office to help pack over 300 gift packs for those attending the event. On the day itself, our museum and activity group volunteers set up table displays with flair and ingenuity. More than 200 people attended the event, including our guest of honour, Ms Sim Ann, Senior Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth, and for Communications and Information. She was visibly impressed with the positive energy and passion of our volunteers, whom she referred to as "givers". The success of the event was the result of the generous contribution of time by these givers. My heartfelt thanks to all those who participated in making FOM40 a success. Memories of the day are captured on pages 2 and 3.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the past and current council members for the tremendous support that they have given me over the last three years. I have enjoyed the privilege of serving with a group of distinguished individuals who have dedicated themselves selflessly to improving the society. Their passion, dedication and drive will be my inspiration as I move on to the next phase of my life.

Every end is a new beginning. As Singapore commemorates its bicentennial milestone next year, I am excited that FOM Singapore will have a new president who will lead the society into 2019. The 2018/2019 council will bring with them fresh ideas and a new vision to take FOM on to the next level.

Please come and meet the members of the new council at the Annual General Meeting on 5 December or show your support by voting for them via the post. It would also be an opportune moment to show your appreciation to the outgoing council members.

Once again, thank you for the friendship and support that you have given me all these years.

Wishing all of you a joyful Christmas and a happy 2019!



Clara Chan
FOM President 2018



Photo of Clara courtesy of the National Heritage Board



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Managing Editor

Andra Leo
andraleo@gmail.com

Commissioning Editor

Patricia Bjaaland Welch

News Editor

Durriya Dohadwala

Photography

Gisella Harrold

Editors/Contributors

Carla Forbes-Kelly
Anne H Perng
Linden Vargish

Advertising Manager

Dobrina Boneva
advertising@fom.sg

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61 Tai Seng Avenue
Crescendas Print Media Hub, #03-03
Singapore 534167
von@xpress.sg

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On the Cover: Oriental Bay Owl / *Burung Pungguk Api*, (*Phodilus badius*). In the Malay world, the *langsuir*, a vampire-like spirit, is said to take the form of an owl with long claws. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



FOM is a volunteer, non-profit society dedicated to providing volunteer guides and financial support to Singapore's museums and cultural institutions and to delivering programmes to enhance the community's knowledge of Asia's history, culture and art.

FOM is an Associate Member of the World Federation of Friends of the Museums.

FOM member privileges include free admission to NHB museums (excluding special exhibitions); access to FOM programmes including docent training, lectures, study tours, volunteer opportunities; a subscription to the FOM magazine, *PASSAGE*, and discounts at selected retail outlets, theatres and restaurants. Membership in FOM ranges from \$30 (senior) - \$120 (family) depending on category of membership.

For more information about FOM, visit our website www.fom.sg or contact the FOM office.

FOM Office

Friends of the Museums (Singapore)
No.61 Stamford Road,
#02-06 Stamford Court
178892 Singapore: (tel: +65 6337 3685)
Website: www.fom.sg

Administration: Katherine Lim
Office Hours: Monday-Friday
9:30 am – 2:30 pm

FOM COUNCIL

President Clara Chan
Vice President Melissa Yeow
Honorary Treasurer Sophia Kan
Honorary Secretary Susan Fong
Council Representatives
Sarah Lev
Heather Muirhead
Sadiah Shahal
Gisella Harrold
Ilknur Yildiz

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FOM Ce

By Darlene



A scant 13 years after Singapore's birth as a republic, a few prescient women organised a group to support the new nation's rich cultural and historical heritage. They founded Friends of the Museums Singapore. Forty years later, FOM now supports nine museums and heritage centres and offers a breadth of activities that include docent-led tours, public lectures, affinity and study groups, curated local tours and themed travel opportunities. And for the last 10 of those 40 years, FOM members have been informed, entertained and enlightened by reading FOM's *PASSAGE* magazine.

Both the 40th anniversary of FOM and 10 years of *PASSAGE*'s publication were duly celebrated with over 200 members and friends on Monday, 1 October, at the Asian Civilisations Museum's Ngee Ann Auditorium. Guests dressed in celebratory red, mingled and admired the creative displays showcasing the museums and an array of activities sponsored by the organisation.

Current FOM president Clara Chan and her committee welcomed the Guest of Honour, Ms Sim Ann, Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Communications and Information, and Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Other distinguished guests included Chang Hwee Nee, CEO of the National Heritage Board. They participated in a ceremonial cake-cutting before Mistress of Ceremonies Sophia Kan officially opened the programme with a short film showcasing FOM's impact on the community.

After delivering her congratulatory address, Minister Sim was given a commemorative gift, a specially selected and bound compendium of *PASSAGE* magazines. The programme continued with a Monday Morning Lecture on Asian Port Cities given by Distinguished Guest and Speaker Mr Kenzie Ting, Group Director of Museums, National Heritage Board. Afterwards, the celebration concluded with a sumptuous tea reception for members and invited guests.

Darlene D Kasten is a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum as well as the Malay Heritage Centre and is the co-chair of Curio.

Photos by Lester Ledesma and Gisella Harrold



celebrates!

D Kasten



A Beautiful Place in Sembawang

By Arlene Bastion

There is no particularly compelling reason to visit Sembawang Park. Its neighbourhood, the Sembawang Housing and Development Board (HDB) area, is sometimes termed “sleepy hollow”, or in Singaporean lingo, *ulu* (jungle), which gives you some idea about the park. Head there if one of these days you feel jaded with glamour and glitz and would give your eye-teeth for a solitary walk along tree-hugged country lanes, fronted by the sea, followed by good, comfort food. It’s a really beautiful place, with its loyal visitors – nature aficionados, campers and picnickers and yes, bridal parties.

The park, which was opened in 1983, is significant for history buffs since it was once the Singapore Naval Base. The Sembawang Shipyard, which you can see when you walk along the seaside, was a British naval base from 1938 to 1968. The roads and streets around the park area are named after royal naval dockyards, warships and also distinguished admirals. You can follow a restored pathway dating from the colonial era.



A giant tree in the park, a tree-hugger's delight

The jewel in the crown is Beaulieu House. Now a seafood restaurant, *Beaulieu* means beautiful place in French, a well-merited name both architecturally and gastronomically. It’s a grand Victorian-style black and white bungalow, with what I’m told are intricate Neo-Classical plaster designs and handcrafted ironwork. Beaulieu was granted conservation status in 2005. It apparently retains the original terrazzo tiles, so watch out for how the marble and quartz chips embedded in them flirt with the sun’s rays shining in. There used to be a mini-museum upstairs. Just outside, is the old navy jetty.

Beaulieu was the former Admiralty House, occupied also by the British armed forces before World War II. It’s hard not to conjure up visions of ladies in ball gowns sweeping down



Looking out towards the old jetty

the stairs or dashing admirals taking the salute from passing ships. Its address is aptly in Nelson Road.

We may be taken up by Beaulieu’s beauty – and food – but its historical significance still remains the most important thing about it. British naval facilities were handed over to the Singapore government in 1968.

Oh, I almost forgot, Beaulieu is also believed to be haunted, particularly by *pontianaks*, female vampire ghosts in Malay mythology. But believe me, chomping on Beaulieu’s culinary offerings is as other-worldly as you’re going to get.

Sembawang Park is named after the Sembawang tree. Developed in the 1970s, the park faces the Straits of Johor in Singapore’s north. This has tempted a swimmer or two and also makes it one of the few parks in Singapore with a natural beach. It is the lungs of the Sembawang HDB town area, itself once a rubber estate, with gambier, pepper and pineapple plantations. For homesick Canadians, there are roads around the park called Canada Road, Ottawa Road, Montreal Road, and there is also Cypress (the name of a street in Vancouver). New Zealanders might be delighted to see roads called New Zealand and Auckland, while Australians will find their country commemorated by street names such as Tasmania and Hobart.

Arlene Bastion is currently a part-time lecturer at a Singapore university.

Photos by the author



Beaulieu House with metal trellis work at the entrance



A decorated bridal bicycle at Beaulieu House

Not Just a Pretty Plate: The Okeover Family Armorial Plate

By Simone F Lee

When visiting the Trade Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), there is a good chance that you will gravitate towards the “Mistake Plate”. With such a great story to tell, it is the logical choice, but if you are ready for a change, I will tell you why you should take a look at the plate next to it, the Okeover Family Armorial Plate.

This plate is part of what is considered the most intricate 18th century armorial dining service produced in China for the British market. It was made for Leake Okeover (1701–1765) and Mary Nichol (died 1764), a wealthy couple who married in 1730. The service was shipped from Canton in two parts, one in 1740 and the other in 1743. The ACM Okeover Plate belongs to the first group.

The Okeover family kept the original drawing, a coloured watercolour painted by the English portraitist Arthur Devis (1708–1787) that was sent to Canton and copied onto the pieces with great care. It is believed to be the only complete original design for an armorial service from the 18th century. The family also kept two original invoices for the sets. One of the bills, dated 1743 reads, “From ye Jerusalem Coffee House, Change Alley, a consignment of fifty plates and four dishes with your arms.” The bill is addressed to Leake Okeover Esqre and is from Joseph Congreve, commander of the ship *Prislowe*. The original price of one plate was around one English pound, about 10 times the price for most armorial porcelain at the time. The invoices refer only to plates and dishes and this information, plus the richness of the decoration, suggests that they were intended more for showing than for use.

Now, let’s look at the design. Both Leake and Mary were entitled to the use of a coat of arms, so the shield at the centre is a side-by-side representation of both families – Leake’s on the left and Mary’s on the right. The shield is surrounded by a rococo floral scroll motif, topped with a helmet with large red and white plumes and an oak tree as the crest. At the bottom are two white horses accompanied by flags, rising from blue water, all enclosed in a shell-shaped decorative panel. There are four small panels on the rim, two with the monogram ‘LMO’ for Leake-Mary-Okeover, and two with what appear to be griffins (composite animals that are part eagle and part lion) above golden crowns. The four panels are framed by dolphins and alternate with European-style flowers. The design made use of the full range of colours available to Chinese artists at the time.

When doing research online in the UK National Archives, I found some information on the Okeover family and on Leake Okeover himself. There is a large amount of accounting records between the years of 1723 and 1762 that belonged to Leake. All his bills, receipts and vouchers had been saved because of his accumulated debts. The National Archive files also indicate that between 1751 and 1752, Leake had to run away to northern France and Belgium



The Okeover plate, rich in detail and history

in order to escape his creditors and that he lived under the pseudonym of Mr Scrimshaw. Mary stayed behind to sort out the problem. After two of the family’s estates were sold, Leake was able to return home to Okeover Hall, the family’s main estate. In the Archives you can also find personal correspondence between Leake and Mary during his period of exile, including an old notebook recounting his travels. Okeover Hall, in Staffordshire, is still the seat of the family, as it has been since the 12th century.

Mary passed away in 1764 and within months, Leake had also died. They didn’t leave a direct heir. However, the Okeover family kept most of the dining service pieces together for many years and finally in 1975 a large batch came up for sale in the collectors’ market, garnering a lot of interest. More recently, in January 2017, one of the plates sold at auction for around US\$22,000.

This beautiful plate is a memento of Leake and Mary’s (love) story as well as the times they lived in. On your next trip to the Trade Gallery at the ACM, I hope you will spend some time with the Okeover Armorial Plate and that you will be as charmed by it as I am.

Simone F Lee is a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum and currently training at the National Museum of Singapore.

Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board



A Day at the Library

By Eric Rosenkranz

The Library of Congress in Washington DC is not only one of the largest repositories of books in the world, but also a museum, an architectural tour de force and a research haven with materials in more than 450 languages.

As a student of antique maps, (some readers might have heard one of my lectures on maps at FOM events) it is always exciting for me to visit the library to see not only its extensive collection of maps but also the first map ever printed with the name “America”. This map was purchased in 2003 by the Library of Congress for \$10 million and is on permanent display.

This year I was in for a special treat as my son Ethan, a Senior Analyst for the United States Senate Budget Committee, had arranged a VIP tour for me. Our first stop was the Map Room where, in addition to viewing Chinese world maps from the 18th century, we also got to see a Jain cosmological map (Fig A). While a normal map tells the viewer how to get from point A to point B, cosmological maps teach the viewer how to get to a different place in the world – nirvana in some cases.

This hand-painted 19th century map shows the three worlds that make up the Jain universe: in the centre we see the famous Mt Meru and the world of the living with mountain ranges and rivers. We can see the lower world of the damned and the outer celestial realm. Concentric circles show us oceans with swimmers and fish.

My congressional liaison guide then took me to the Islamic Room where we were able to view two amazing maps. The first, (Fig B) from a 1553 book in Turkish called *The Wonders of Creation*, shows the world (oriented to the south) supported by a cow and then a fish. The curator explained to me that these represent abundance. Below, we can see an angel (look for the wings). While the map



Fig A. The Jain world view

uses a traditional Islamic projection of the world as a flat disk, it also shows the Ottomans’ early use of geographical information based upon European cartographic methodologies and explorations.

In this late 17th century map (Fig C) called in Arabic “The Pearl of Wonders and the Uniqueness of Things



Fig B. The Wonders of Creation



Fig C. Medieval Islamic map of the world

Strange" we can see the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, China and India in the north and the "Christian sects and the states of Byzantium" in the south. The world is surrounded by a sea and the Kuwaiti curator translated for me where the demons lived. This map is also a cosmological one so that its purpose is not to show an accurate geography, but to show the reader an overview of the then knowledge of the world.

Next we moved to the Asian Room where we met the curator in charge of Tibetan and Mongolian work. She showed us a magnificent 20th century Tibetan Wheel of Life (Fig D). Sharing some passing similarities to the Jain map we'd seen earlier, in this Buddhist world view, we



Fig D. The Tibetan Wheel of Life

can see gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings, all held in the grasp of the Lord of Death. In the centre we see a cock, snake and a pig representing desire, hatred and ignorance. The curator was excited to see something that was new for her: a white thread that led people from the evils of the world up to the Buddha: a path that frees people from the earthly cycles. (See if you can find it, start at the centre and go up to the left.)

Lastly, we found ourselves in the Rare Books Department where I was thrilled to see a famous T-O map (Fig E). The book itself was printed in Venice around 1480 although the first examples of this type of map come from the 7th century. T-O maps are symbolic representations of the world. The 'T' represents the Christian cross and the 'O' is the ocean that surrounds the world. Asia is at the top of the map, separated from Europe and Africa by the Nile River, which in turn are separated from each other by the Mediterranean. Below each continent we can read the name of each of Noah's sons who repopulated that particular continent.

The Library of Congress is a must-see on everyone's visit to Washington DC. Make sure to take the public free tour and, if you have the time, sign up for a reader's card and explore the book stacks. Private tours such as I took can also be arranged through a congressional office.

Eric Rosenkranz is an amateur antique map collector and historian. He has lectured on maps of Asia for FOM for the past 10 years with his most recent talk entitled Why is Singapore called Singapore: A story told through maps.

All photos courtesy of the Library of Congress website: www.loc.gov/exhibits/world/earth.html



Fig E. T-O Map of the World

From Portrait to Collage

A Selection from Amek Gambar: Peranakans and Photography

By Dominic Low

Just as familiarity breeds contempt, so the ubiquity of photographic images today more often than not leads us to overlook photographs as unique three-dimensional objects. In this day and age where photographic images are produced and reproduced so easily and cheaply by simply pressing a button on our handheld devices and viewed and distributed so widely and quickly through print and digital media, it may be hard to imagine a time when photographic images were made up of tiny particles of silver.

It is exactly this that the exhibition *Amek Gambar: Peranakans and Photography* calls attention to by bringing together a large variety of old photographs. From daguerreotypes to ancestral portraits, studio photographs to family albums, the exhibition traces how quickly the revolutionary technology of photography arrived in Singapore and the region, and how it was embraced by the Peranakans from the outset. The exhibition approaches the history of photography through the prism of the Peranakan community and the photography collection of the Peranakan Museum, from which a few photographs will be examined in this article.



Fig A. Seah Liang Seah (1850-1925), on back: "To M. S. Tomlinson with kind regards from S. Liang Seah 余連城". G.R. Lambert & Co. Singapore, around 1900s. Albumen print (cabinet card format). Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee

The photographs made by the renowned studio G R Lambert & Co provide many early examples of the relationship between photography and the leading Peranakan figures of the time. The albumen print (Fig A) shows a portrait of Seah Liang Seah (1850-1925), who like



Fig B. Tan Cheng Siang (1885-1977), Koon Sun Photographer (冠新), Singapore, 1910s. Gelatin silver print. Gift of the Estate of Tan Cheng Siang

his father Seah Eu Chin (1805-1883), was a prominent leader of the Teochew community and head of Ngee Ann Kongsi. He was also one of the founding members of the Straits Chinese British Association and successor to Whampoa on the Straits Legislative Council. He supported causes such as the preservation of traditional Chinese practices and the Singapore medical school. Like many other Peranakans, Seah moved between Chinese and European circles with ease, as affirmed by the note written on the verso of the card in what is probably Seah's own hand, "To M. S. Tomlinson with kind regards from S. Liang Seah 余連城 / Singapore 22nd February 1900". It might have been a gift intended for Samuel Tomlinson (1859-1935), a municipal engineer and fellow Justice of the Peace who helped design the Jinrickisha Station building. The size of the photograph's backing (17.5 x 10cm) follows the dimensions of the format known as cabinet portrait cards, which were exchanged among European and local elites as personal keepsakes, a practice also popular in the Dutch East Indies.

Inscribed in gold at the bottom of the card is the studio mark of G R Lambert & Co. First opened in 1867 along High Street by the Dresden native Gustave Richard Lambert (1846-1907), the studio produced numerous photographs of Singapore and its residents. The firm was often chosen as the official photographers for important state events in



Fig C. *Untitled. Low Kway Song, Singapore (1889-1982). Singapore, around 1950s. Hand-coloured gelatin silver print. Gift of Hall of Phoenix and Peony*

Singapore. In 1886 it was appointed official photographer of the King of Siam and the Sultan of Johor, as indicated by the two coats of arms that accompany the studio stamp on both sides of the card.

While G R Lambert & Co might have been the longest-running photography studio in Singapore when it closed in 1918, it was definitely not the first. The first was established by a Frenchman named Gaston Dutronquoy who produced daguerreotypes (where the photograph is constituted by a silver image that sits on a polished silver plate) as early as 1843. Preceding this was the first written description of photography in Singapore recorded around 1840 by the Malay language teacher Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (1797-1854), just a year after the French state bought the invention of the daguerreotype from Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851) and made it publicly available. It was also around the same time in 1841 that William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) patented the calotype (the photograph is a paper negative from which positive prints can be produced). Many of these early photographic types, which are very different from what we commonly see today, are on display at the exhibition.

With the outbreak of WWI, dominance of the photography market enjoyed by European studios in Singapore and Indonesia came to an end. In their place arose numerous Chinese-owned, and often Cantonese, photography studios, which was surprising given British photographer John Thomson's observation in the 1860s that, "the Chinese having, at that time, refused to lend themselves to such devilry, as taking likenesses of objects without the touch of human hands." In the first decades of the 20th century, many of these businesses were operated by members of the same extended family despite advertising under different names. None is better-known than the Lee family from Small Yellow Earth Village (Siu Wong Nai Cheun or 小黄泥村) in China, who opened a dozen photographic studios in Southeast Asia including Lee Brothers and Koon Sun in Singapore. Located at 179 South Bridge Road, Koon Sun Photo Studio was started by Lee Tat Loon and Lee Tit Loon, whose eldest son Lee King Yan established Lee Brothers Studio in 1911.

The Koon Sun studio mark can be seen on the photograph of Tan Cheng Siang (1885-1977) (Fig B). Tan Cheng Siang

was the only son of Tan Beng Wan (1851-1891), and grandson of Tan Kim Tian (1832-1882). Both his father and grandfather established the Tan Kim Tian and Son Steamship Company in 1865. It was the first shipping firm in Singapore to replace their sailing vessels with steamships. Both also played significant roles in Singapore society – Tan Kim Tian was the first president of the Tan clan temple; Tan Beng Wan served as Municipal Commissioner from 1888 until his death and was one of the first members of the Chinese Advisory Board. A proud alumnus of Raffles Institution, Tan Cheng Siang donated the funds to build a theatre in the new Raffles Institution when it shifted to Grange Road in 1972, following in the footsteps of his grandfather who previously funded the construction of the school's canteen at its original location in Bras Basah. Like the photograph of his father in the exhibition, this portrait of Tan Cheng Siang came from Botan House, the ancestral home of the descendants of Tan Kim Tian, which stood at the corner of Neil and Craig Roads, but was demolished in the 1980s.

Not only does the exhibition explore the historical and social significance of photographs made to record cherished moments and represent identities, it also addresses the role of photography in artistic practices. Both painting and photography are brought together in pioneering artist Low Kway Song's (1889-1982) unfinished work (Fig C). Low applied pastel onto the photographs of the baba and the nyonya (recently identified as Mr and Mrs Chan Teck Chye) in the foreground and integrated them into the moonlit woodland landscape behind, with painterly brushstrokes that create abstract shadowy forms suggestive of foliage and a family of deer. Here the composition in the background functions as both landscape painting in the Western tradition, as well as backdrop, which was a studio staple often imported from Shanghai and Europe. In fact, he introduced a backdrop improver screen in 1924. Low Kway Song was a trailblazer in many ways. He became an artist when it was unpopular for a baba to do so, executing portraits and full-figure memorial paintings. He is said to have been the first artist to be paid a four-figure fee when he was commissioned to paint a portrait of the magnate Oei Tiong Ham (1866-1924) in 1927. And although he opened Raffles Art Studio along Bras Basah Road and taught as an honorary art instructor at the Amateur Drawing Association in 1911, he left it all to become a pastor of the Malacca Straits Chinese Methodist Church, where services were conducted in Baba Malay. This work is a testimony to Low's interest in the backdrop and his openness to experimentation with painting and photography, which many artists deemed irreconcilable. In fact, when faced with the invention of photography in 1839, the French academician painter Paul Delaroche reportedly lamented, "From today, painting is dead!" Low Kway Song proves with this work that the opposite is true.

Dominic Low is an assistant curator at the Peranakan Museum. His previous projects include Joseon Korea: Court Treasures and City Life and the contemporary art commission Grains of Thought by Eng Tow (2015). He received his BA in the History of Art with Material Studies from University College London.

Images courtesy of the Peranakan Museum

The Chetti of Malacca

By Vasanthi Ravi

The term *Peranakan* is an Indonesian/Malay word that means locally-born and has mostly been used to refer to the Peranakan Chinese. However, not all Peranakans are of Chinese ancestry.

In the Straits Settlements, there was a small but significant community of Peranakan Indians known as Chetti Melaka (also Chitty Melaka). They originated around the same time as the Peranakan Chinese, during the Malacca Sultanate when Tamil merchants began marrying local women. The word Chetti comes from the Tamil word denoting a merchant and, since they were born locally, in Malacca, they coined the term "Chetti Melaka" to differentiate themselves from the India-born.

The Chetti Melaka are a mix of the Indian, Malay and Chinese races yet have a distinct culture. They strongly resemble the Malays and Baba Nyonyas (the Malacca Straits-born Chinese) in terms of clothing, spoken language, food and appearance. However, despite marrying Malay women, these Tamil merchants did not convert to Islam, but retained their Hindu faith and adhered strictly to Hindu religious practices. Therefore, their children were given the names of classic Hindu deities and many have Hindu surnames such as Pillay and Naicker. Surprisingly, their Malay wives followed Hinduism after marriage.

Many rituals/rites of the Chetti Melaka are similar to Hindu traditions, but with some influence from Malay customs. Mostly, the ceremonies are conducted at home with special festive dishes cooked and served. The women believe in home-cooked dishes and seldom use caterers.

Ear Piercing

In the Chetti Melaka community, both girls and boys go through an initiation ceremony at ages three, five or seven. The child has to sit on his/her maternal uncle's lap while a goldsmith pierces his/her ears with gold needles.

Coming of Age/Puberty Ceremony (*Sadanggu*)

This special fertility ceremony is an essential ritual for every girl and without it having been performed, a girl cannot get married. The significance is to receive blessings from the elderly and also from married women, so the girl can be fertile and bear children.



Photograph of the *Sadanggu* ceremony of Sarda Pillay

On the first day of her menstrual cycle, the girl is bathed in turmeric water (*air kunyit*). She is confined to her room for at least two weeks and given special healthy food. Mixing freely with family, friends or relatives is prohibited until the fertility ceremony has been conducted. On the 16th day, the girl is dressed in a white sarong, *baju kurung*, to symbolize purity and virginity, and ritually bathed in turmeric water with flowers. She

is then dressed in a new sari and adorned with elaborate jewellery, which includes bangles, rings, anklets, a necklace (*addigai*) and special ornamental hairpins. She is seated on a white cloth filled with husked rice (*padi*). Seven trays with various items such as milk, betel leaves, areca nut, rice cakes, fruit, saffron water, quicklime, rose-water and also ceremonial items, including the roller of the grinding stone (*batu gling*) which symbolizes a baby, are waved three times, in a clockwise direction, from the girl's head to her knees. This clockwise waving is called *pusing pusing*. Only female relatives and friends are invited to this ceremony, but the girl's maternal uncle is allowed to participate.

The girl and guests are then served a rice dish (*puttu*) containing coconut and sugar prepared specially for this ritual; men are prohibited from eating it. They believe that if a man eats the *puttu*, it will bring bad luck to the girl who underwent the ceremony. The significance of this ritual is to announce that the young girl is now of age for marriage.

Engagement Ceremony (*Parisom*)

A marriage begins with the 'enquiry' (*merisik*) followed by the *parisom* during which the groom's party sends seven trays of gifts to the bride's family. Fixing of a wedding date, applying red powder (*kum kum*) on each other's foreheads, and the exchanging of rings completes the *parisom*. Before distributing the wedding invitation cards, a few cards are sent to the temple, along with a thinly sliced areca nut



Two photographs of BS Naiker and Avarami on their wedding day

wrapped in a betel leaf. This ceremony is called *hantar sireh koil pathiram* (sending the invitation cards to the temple), after which comes the custom of making the wedding pendant, (*menempah thali*).

The Chetti Wedding Ceremony



A photograph of AS Pillay and Suppummal on their wedding day

The wedding ceremony is an extravagant affair extending up to five days depending on the family's finances. A pavilion (*thiam panthal*) is erected a week before the wedding ceremony at the bride's home. Banana plants with fruit and flowers are placed at the entrance and an odd number of mango leaves are hung on the *panthal*, the ceremonial tent.

On the eve of the wedding,

henna is applied to the hands and feet of both the bride and bridegroom, a custom called *berhinai*. On the wedding day, there is the *berarak* procession, when drummers and musicians carrying colourful banners and fans walk in a parade with a page-boy and girl accompanying them.

The wedding attire often follows South Indian Hindu traditions, but either style can be showcased – the South Indian or the Chetti Melaka. In the former, the groom wears a short coat, a long white wrap-around cloth called a *veshti*, with a turban and a shoulder wrap, while his bride wears a sari. In the Chetti Melaka style he sports a long-sleeved shirt with a full-length sarong or *dhoti*, an embroidered scarf (*marakoo*), a silver belt (*pinding*), large pendant (*dabor*) and headgear called *talpa*, while the bride wears a sarong (*songket*), a huge gold pendant (*padakom*) and beaded slippers (*kasut manek*).

Food (*Makan Chetti*)

Their cuisine is a blend of Indian, Malay and Chinese; some dishes such as fish in tamarind curry (*lauk pindang*) are unique; they are a blend of Indian spices and Malay ingredients. A family's secret recipes are passed on to the daughters and the women painstakingly prepare these dishes.

Funerals

Burial is the common practice and formal mourning rituals follow Hindu traditions. Annual prayers and offerings of food (*parachu*) mark the death anniversary. A unique tradition of climbing the hill (*naik bukit*) is celebrated in January, particularly before the *bhogi parachu*, when the family cleans their ancestors' graves.

Chetti Melaka of the Straits – Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities is a special exhibition at the Indian Heritage Centre, its first co-created exhibition in collaboration with the Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association of Singapore. Many younger people from this community are today unable to trace their Chetti Melaka heritage because they married outside their communities, which are dwindling in number.



A set of photographs of V Letchemee and her family performing the *naik bukit* ceremony at DV Chitty's grave at Choa Chu Kang cemetery

This exhibition aims to showcase their unique heritage, language, cuisine and cultural practices and to help others better understand this community. The pioneers of their community have also been showcased. The exhibition runs until 5 May 2019, with tours in English on Wednesdays and Fridays at 2:00 pm and in Tamil every first Friday of the month at 11.30 am.

Vasanthi Ravi is a social entrepreneur working with NGOs in India and Singapore. She is also the president of a Toastmasters Club, designs silver jewellery, and guides at the Indian Heritage Centre.

All photos courtesy of the Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board

My Date with an Empu

By Darlene D Kasten



Forging a keris from billet to finished blade. Photos by Darlene Kasten

Almost immediately after moving to Singapore from South Africa in early 2016, I began my training to become an FOM docent at the Malay Heritage Centre. It was the first time this American had ever heard of a *keris*. I learned that the *keris*, a dagger often recognised by its distinctive serpent-like curves, is the most revered weapon known to the Malays, the ethnocultural group that shares ancestry in the Southeast Asian Malay Archipelago. I learned that perhaps even more than its being a weapon, the *keris* is a spiritual object, a talisman reputed to have magical powers and to provide protection to the wearer. They are accessories

for ceremonial dress, an indicator of social status, heirlooms and a recognisable symbol of ethnic identity.

Keris are forged from iron and nickel. It is thought that Malays discovered the nickel-iron combination in metal from meteorites, as nickel is otherwise very scarce in the region. It is known that a meteorite which fell to earth in central Java in the 18th century was used for *keris* that are closely connected to the courts of Yogyakarta. Perhaps it was the discovery of this material that dropped from the heavens which gave rise to the *keris*'s spiritual reputation. Today it remains a ceremonial and ritual item of dress, such as for traditional weddings when the groom's *keris* is worn tucked into his waistband.

The *keris* is crafted by a specialised bladesmith called an *empu*, a highly respected artisan with knowledge of the rituals and mythology handed down by generations of *empu* before him. Part blacksmith and part spiritual leader, the *empu* forges



Sparks fly when forging layers of iron and nickel. Photo by Nick Kasten



Darlene Kasten with Ki Empu Sungkowo Harumbrodjo outside the forge. Photo by Vincent Kasten

the blade, folding together the layers of black iron and silvery nickel to create the *pamor* – the pattern on the blade, of which there is an amazing number of variants – and the *dapur*, or shape of the blade, which may be wavy with an odd number of waves (*luk*), or may be straight (*lurus*).

Learning about the Malays and the legendary *keris* was new and exciting to me. Little did I know that my American husband Vince had been fascinated by it from childhood. With the additional information I had about the history of the *keris* in the region, my husband decided to go to the source and learn more about these legendary weapons and in the process, commission a *keris* for himself and our two grown sons.



Vince Kasten in Madura with Empu Taufik Rahman holding a *keris luk 39*. Photo by Achmad Hariska

The first challenge was to track down an active *empu*. Honoured *empus* who produce the traditional *keris* can still be found in the Malay Archipelago, but they are a scarce and dwindling fraternity. They don't advertise; they are not popular attractions on TripAdvisor and they typically do not speak English. It took significant effort to piece together information from multiple sources for Vince to find out what he needed. This led ultimately to him engaging Haris, an English-speaking guide who is knowledgeable about the *keris* and also *empus*.

Vince made the trip to visit Empu Taufik Rahman in Aeng Tong Tong Village on Madura Island in February without me. Travelling to Madura is a commitment – from Singapore, one must fly into Surabaya on the East Java mainland and then transfer by ferry and automobile to the remote island village. Haris became a gateway to other active *empus*, which is how in June, while accompanying my husband and our younger son who was visiting from Japan, I came to have my date with Ki Empu Sungkowo Harumbrodjo, more conveniently located on a quiet suburban street in Yogyakarta.

We visited the *empu* during Ramadan, which we were told is an auspicious time to commission a *keris*. Part of the *empu's* ritual in creating a *keris* involves fasting, offerings and prayer, which of course is a normal part of Ramadan observance. The *empu* fasts for three days before forging a *keris*, which can only be done on certain prescribed days of the week.

When we arrived at Empu Harumbrodjo's combined home and working forge, we found him still in morning prayer. After he finished, he showed us around his workshop. We saw a large portrait of his father under whose tutelage he had learned the craft of *keris*-making, and he showed us some of his many awards and prize-winning *keris*. The most interesting piece of history was a framed chronology showing an unbroken line of 17 generations of *empus*, which began during the Majapahit empire, led to his father and finally to him.

Later, we were privileged to see *keris*-making in action. Two assistants in the forge were hard at work heating

and forge-welding a billet made up of layers of iron and nickel. According to the Malays, the *keris* contains all the elements of nature plus one: earth is represented by metal in the form of the iron and nickel and wood in the form of charcoal used to fuel the forge. The fire is energised by the wind, delivered by a Southeast Asian traditional bellows consisting of two bamboo cylinders each fitted with a piston on a long rod that is pumped by hand by one of the two assistants. (This is the very method portrayed in relief on the 15th century Candi Sukoh in Central Java which is reputed to show the earliest known example of traditional *keris* forging). Water is used to cool the blade down after forging and last, but certainly not least, the *keris* is imbued by another element of nature, the spirit of the soul or *aku*, imparted by the *empu's* ritual.

I must admit that I hadn't really known what to expect from my visit. My plan was to merely share in the experience and witness the making of a *keris*. But that's not what happened. After some time spent getting to know each other, the *empu* was willing to show us some special, certified masterpieces he had created. I was immediately drawn to one, a *keris lurus* with a red lacquer sheath. Vince and our son Nick also felt an immediate connection with two of the other *keris*. We decided to choose another *keris*, one that we deemed appropriate for our older son Alex in the USA and with that, conclude our visit.



Top - our *keris*, a *keris lurus*. Bottom, L to R, *keris luk 3*, *keris lurus*, *keris luk 11*. Photo by Darlene Kasten

A final note regarding importing *keris* to Singapore: Now that we had ours, we had to get them back to Singapore, a straightforward process. A *keris* is a controlled item here and a permit from the Singapore Police Force (SPF) is required for any *keris* with blade length exceeding 30 centimetres. For a regular person (that is, not a dealer), the permit process starts at the airport where we declared the knives with the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority of Singapore (ICA), who inventoried and impounded the knives. ICA referred the matter to the SPF Licensing & Regulatory Department (SPC) who then assessed the *keris* and notified us via email to make the licence application online. A fee of \$22 per knife gets the permit and a trip to SPF's Cantonment Complex gets the knives.

Darlene D Kasten is an FOM docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Malay Heritage Centre.

The Royal Arts of Jodhpur

By Seema Shah

My first encounter with Jodhpur, a city located at the edge of the arid Thar Desert in the northwestern corner of India, took my breath away. For three magical days and nights I attended an international folk festival within the confines of the city's historical Mehrangarh Fort, perched precariously 400 feet above on a perpendicular cliff. The 15th century fort's palaces and courtyards transformed as stages and auditoriums for performances during the day and by night, its majestic stone walls shone in the light of a full moon and a hundred flickering oil lamps. This exhilarating experience made me eager to learn more about this former princely state of India, as well as the current custodian of the fort and palace, His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh II.

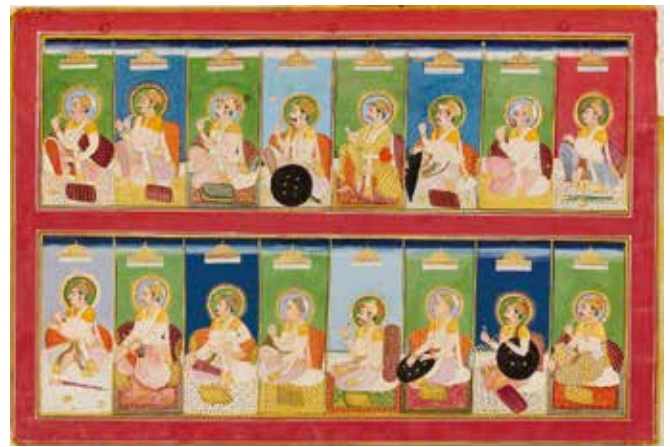
The opportunity arose when the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (MFAH) announced the opening of an epic exhibition, *Peacock in the Desert: The Royal Arts of Jodhpur, India*. It features 250 objects of Indian courtly life housed in the Mehrangarh Fort, many of which have never left Jodhpur, let alone India. Some of the pieces on display include lavishly made ceremonial objects, dazzling jewels, carpets, weapons and a monumental 17th century court tent. What makes this a landmark show is that it was conceived and executed by Indian nationals and in the words of Gary Tinterow, MFAH director, "one of the most spectacular ever organised by any museum anywhere."

The exhibition chronicles the story of the Rathore dynasty, a Hindu warrior clan that ruled over the Marwar-Jodhpur region and grew in power and wealth from its strategic location at the crossroads of trade routes. The clan traces its lineage back to Rama, the mythical hero of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* and through him back to the sun god Surya himself. Their evolving, cosmopolitan culture was influenced by their political and military alliances with colonial invaders – first Muslim Mughals, then the British. Correspondingly, the exhibition begins in the 16th century and concludes in the 20th century with India under the British Raj.

According to Mahrukh Tarapor, Senior Advisor at MFAH for international initiatives, the aim is to recount four centuries of one royal family's history that serves as "a microcosm of what all of India is." According to her, it was the royal houses of India that kept the traditions alive during the long years of colonial rule. The traditions were threatened when, in 1971, the Indian government passed a constitutional amendment that stripped India's maharajas of their titles and their privy purses, leaving many a noble unable to maintain his palaces and collections. HH Gaj Singh



Lal Dera or Red Tent, an intricate imperial tent captured as spoils of war



The Descendants of Rama - an illustration of the Rathore genealogy

II needed to find a way to offset the maintenance costs of the palaces, forts, jewels, paintings and cars that made up his lavish inheritance. While in Europe he'd seen how the nobility had turned stately homes into hotels and thrown open their magnificent gardens to ticketed tours. "That made me think: We can do it as well." It led him to transition part of his fort into a museum and convert a section of his palace into a luxury hotel. Today the fortress attracts more than one million paying visitors a year. Admission fees support a staff of nearly 300 and allow Mehrangarh to be self-sustaining.

The exhibition opens with a dramatic recreation of a wedding procession featuring the life-size mannequin of an elephant adorned with traditional wedding regalia and royal insignia. According to Dr Karni Singh Jasol, Director of the Mehrangarh Museum Trust, no matter which century, the Rathore nobility were always on the move and they did it in style. The elaborate, domed and gilded *Mahadol* (palanquin) was won in a battle from the governor of Gujarat in 1730 and took 12 men synchronising their steps to a song, to lift the king, seated within. On view also is a custom-built 1927 Rolls Royce Phantom for use by the female members of the court. The car comes fitted with a blue *purdah* glass to maintain their privacy, as well as a searchlight for tiger hunting.



Jewel-encrusted punch dagger from the al-Sabah collection, Kuwait

Rathore rulers spent long periods away from Jodhpur on military missions and one of the highlights of the show is an extraordinary 17th century ruby-coloured tent, believed to have been captured during a surprise attack on the camp of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. It is one of the oldest, intact Indian court tents. With walls of silk velvet embroidered with floral motifs, it was indeed very valuable – both materially and symbolically.

Other galleries depict the life of Indian royal women within a *zenana*, a part of the palace that was accessible only



A magnificent folio depicting Shiva riding a fantastical peacock aircraft



Miniature depicting royal women actively participating in sports such as polo and hunting with the maharaja

by women and the maharaja. Contrary to the popular belief that royal women spent their days hidden away behind sandstone *jalis* (screens) viewing courtly proceedings, paintings in the exhibition reveal women participating in festivals, hunts and polo tournaments. Also on display is a stunning pair of inlaid ivory clubs used by women for exercise and military training. The exhibition explores the crucial role these women played as agents of cultural change and patrons of the arts. Over time these *zenanas* became the centres of culture, language and goods exchange, where the royal ladies wielded their own power.

With the decline of the Mughal influence in the late 18th century, the Rathore royal atelier attracted many Mughal-trained artists such as Dalchand, who left the imperial workshops to work at Rajput courts. This resulted in a vibrant artistic period that saw splendid textiles, finely crafted arms and armour and stunning miniature paintings, all executed in a hybrid Mughal-Rathore style.

It is this marvelous miniature collection of Indian paintings from the royal court collection of Marwar-Jodhpur that defined the show for me. Produced for the private enjoyment of the maharajas, they chart the artistic development of the court of Jodhpur across three consecutive reigns of maharajas and are steeped in the local atmosphere. Strikingly innovative in their large scale, they reveal the



Portrait of a young maharaja resplendent in brocade and jewels



Every community can be identified by its turbans, which are a reflection of the region's diversity

bold creativity of Marwar-Jodhpur artists through their "monumental manuscripts". Several of these large folios, each a full-page painting approximately four feet in width, are featured in the exhibition. The show-stopper is a triptych depicting Lord Shiva gliding on his *vimana* chariot – his aircraft – over dark, swirling monsoon clouds. Like most North Indian court paintings, these works are glowing and finely detailed opaque watercolours on paper, reflecting the sophistication of the royal atelier.

The last section of the exhibition, *The Raj*, includes extravagant, large-scale objects influenced by the arrival of the British in 1818, including clothing, paintings and the maharaja's personal aeroplane, the 1944 Stinson L-5 Sentinel. The objects illustrate the influence of the British on Jodhpur royalty who began to embrace modernity and western culture even as India moved towards independence, which it gained in 1947. The objects from the fort museum are complemented by the loan of several paintings from Queen Elizabeth II's royal collection and a stunning floor mat woven out of ivory and silver from the al-Sabah Collection in Kuwait.

In conclusion, the sun is far from setting on this illustrious royal house. The family has come a long way from its trying days. HH Gaj Singh has involved his 41-year-old, Cambridge-educated daughter, Shivranjani Rajye, in the business. She has played a transformational role in running the fort and hotel properties and is currently spear-heading a project on re-imagining Mehrangarh for future generations. "I am not a fan of static tradition," she says. "As long as it's dynamic and changing, you don't have to go from tradition to modern."

Peacock in the Desert will travel to the Seattle Art Museum in autumn, continuing on to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada.

Seema Shah takes great pride in her Indian heritage and enjoys learning about the traditional arts and culture of Asia. She is currently living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



An ornate gilt and wood royal palanquin

Photos courtesy of the Mehrangarh Museum Trust

Finding Magic and Menace in the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings

By Marcus Ng



A view of the Goh Seng Choo Gallery's latest exhibition from William Farquhar's collection of natural history drawings

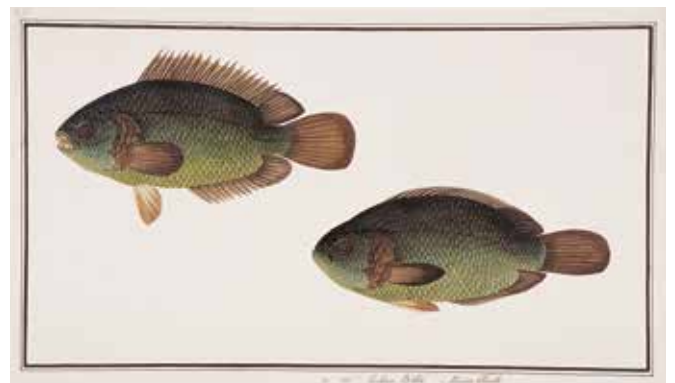
The Goh Seng Choo Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore underwent a refresh with a new rotation which opened in July 2018. Titled *Magic and Menace*, the exhibition explores the world of supernatural beliefs practised by traditional Southeast Asian societies. It provides a multisensory experience of plants and animals prized by traditional healers, where visitors can explore how they are used for their curative powers or their symbolic or 'magical' properties – such as to relieve illness, guard against evil spirits or danger and even harm or manipulate rivals and foes.

Mention "magic" and many today would probably cast their minds at the world of Harry Potter or illusionists such as David Copperfield or Houdini. For many people in Southeast Asia, magic is neither fiction nor a fancy trick. Beliefs and practices concerning the invisible realm, a plane of existence inhabited by forces or spirits that could act as friend or foe to mortals, still pervade everyday life as well as critical times such as births, harvests and sickness.

In the Malay Archipelago, local communities often turn to traditional healers with a particular set of knowledge or skills that allow them to act as intermediaries between the tangible and intangible realms. These individuals are often known as *pawang*, *bomoh*, *dukun* or *datu*, but traditional midwives or *mak bidan* could also be regarded as similar practitioners who help to safeguard the physical as well as spiritual well-being of young mothers and infants.

Magic and Menace begins with the story of the most

powerful magician in the Malay world – Puteri Gunung Ledang. She was an immortal princess who lived at Gunung Ledang, the highest mountain in Johor, located at the border between Muar and Melaka. Her hand was sought in marriage by the Sultan of Melaka, to no avail as the princess set a series of impossible requests that included a cup of the sultan's son's blood. Centuries later, William Farquhar became the first European to ascend Gunung Ledang (also known as Mount Ophir), where he collected a number of botanical specimens, including a herb known as *cucur atap*,



Climbing Perch / Ikan Puyu, (*Anabas testudineus*). Some people in the region like to rear these fish, not as pets but as protective charms against black magic and spirits



Zebra Dove / Merbok Balam, *Geopelia striata*, Nests of doves are thought to have protective powers for children. Hence, deserted dove nests were burnt as a part of a ritual to ward off evil spirits

an ingredient in a traditional midwife's remedy known as *rempah ratus*, and a still-unidentified fern frond.

According to medieval European lore, ferns confer the gift of invisibility as they produce no visible fruit or seeds but reproduce by means of near-invisible spores. In this region, however, the fern known as *paku langsuir* (also known as bird's nest fern) acquired a less savoury reputation as the abode of a bloodthirsty spirit known as the *langsuir* or *langsuyar*. The reason for this belief is unclear, but large owls are known to nest in such ferns and the *langsuir* is said to be able to assume the form of this nocturnal bird of prey. The image of an Oriental Bay Owl is on the cover of this issue.

To ward off *langsuir* and other vampires that threaten young mothers and children, people in this region have turned to fauna and flora that could be seen as magical or menacing. The nests of doves, a bird that produces 'milk' from its crop to feed its young, are burnt in rituals to protect infants. Another mortal bane of the *langsuir* is the climbing perch, a fish with sharp spines that could equally injure both mortal flesh as well as malicious spirits. Some people continue to rear climbing perches at home as protective charms against black magic. This fish may have become associated with magical powers owing to its unusual ability to crawl on land to seek new habitats, and thus cross the threshold between the elements of water and earth.

Creatures that straddle multiple realms have also been imbued with powers that go beyond the physical. Snakes, which are at home in trees, on the ground and in water, are commonly seen as life-threatening forces but also revered as protective motifs. Their ability to cast off their old skin and habit of emerging from burrows deep in the earth have made

them symbols of rebirth and immortality or representatives of the under- or netherworld.

Some plants have also gained an association with supernatural forces, perhaps because of their strong fragrance or forbidding appearance. Jasmine and chempaka flowers are prized for their sweet aroma, but the trees that produce these blooms are also treated with caution as places that are believed to attract or shelter spirits. Large fig trees have long been thought to harbour ghouls, and the kapok tree, which rivals the figs in height and boasts a thorny trunk to boot, was similarly regarded after it arrived in Southeast Asia from the New World.

Kapok trees may look menacing, but they produce a cotton that offers an experience that could be described as "magical". Lightweight and buoyant, kapok cotton has served as a luxurious and life-saving stuffing for pillows, mattresses and lifejackets. Other menacing-looking species have also added a little magic to our lives: the fearsome-looking Bombay duck is a much-loved staple in Mumbai; while the prepossessing soldier catfish was the source of isinglass, a gelatinous substance used to clarify beer and wine. Stingrays are feared for their venomous sting, but their tough, leathery skin (known as shagreen) was prized as a decorative layer in sword handles, sheathes, snuff boxes and tables. Closer to home, the durian fruit is an incomparable treat to some and a foul threat to others, while the koel, dubbed the Indian nightingale by fans elsewhere, is bemoaned as a menace to light sleepers.



Durian / Durian (*Durio zibethinus*). Magic or menace? The durian is both, as a fruit that is revered by gourmards but reviled by those with delicate noses

Finally, magic also pervaded beliefs about many of the spices that were worth their weight in gold in medieval times. Europeans, duped by Arab and Indian middlemen, once believed that pepper grew on trees guarded by serpents, while crops such as nutmeg and cloves were thought to originate from a Far Eastern paradise on earth. Drawn to these spices, Portuguese and Dutch sailors embarked on ambitious voyages that led them to Southeast Asia from the 16th century. Their efforts to monopolise a market that offered magic to the senses also unleashed an era of menace – changing the course of the region's history through a legacy of colonialism and warfare.

Marcus Ng is an independent researcher with a focus on Singapore's natural and marine heritage. He curated the Magic and Menace rotation with Sharon Lim, Assistant Curator at the National Museum of Singapore.

All photos courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

Touring the Asian Civilisations Museum with a Tibetan Lama

By Tara Dhar Hasnain

Earlier this year, I was excited to learn that a very senior Tibetan Buddhist Lama, Geshe Dorji Damdul, a close confidant of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, was to visit Singapore in June 2018, to give teachings at the Tibetan Buddhist Centre. He had visited Singapore earlier, but had never been to the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), which has many beautiful Tibetan Buddhist artefacts.

When I asked him if he would like me to accompany him there, he responded with an enthusiastic “yes”. I am very grateful to a good friend, Tara Melwani, who helped me to arrange everything. We invited some of the museum’s docents to meet him so they could ask him their burning questions about the intriguing Tantric Buddhist artefacts in this museum. Eight docents joined this special tour for the chance to interact one-on-one with an English-speaking master who has years of experience translating the Dalai Lama’s teachings in the West.

On a sunny June morning, as I picked up Geshe la* (like the Doctor of Divinity, the Geshe degree is by rigorous examination, after 20-odd years of intensive Buddhist study) Dorji Damdul, I wondered how this encounter between a devoted Tibetan Buddhist monk, albeit a modern one, and a cosmopolitan bunch of committed museum docents would turn out.

Both parties seemed to enjoy it all – the museum visit included a Q and A session, followed by a light lunch at the café next door, where the docents continued to interact with him. All those who joined us saw it as a great opportunity to clarify many details about the stunning artefacts in the galleries they guide in.

To begin with, Geshe la looked with interest and close attention at the striking Buddhist statues in Ancient Religions Gallery 1, at times with some commentary by Abha Kaul or myself. But as we walked through Gallery 2 (AR2) and approached the Tibetan/Tantric Buddhist area, the docents started firing questions at him.

They were struck by his confidence in dealing with intricate subjects, by the depth of his awareness of their symbolism and the clear language he used in explaining the



Group photo of docents and others with Geshe Dorji Damdul at the Asian Civilisations Museum

implications of their sometimes surprising imagery: pictures of charnel grounds; a fierce-looking female with bulging eyes and covered only by a flayed human skin, seemingly at odds with the Buddha’s message of peace and serenity; ‘enlightened’ creatures locked in tight sexual embrace; and much else.

By the end of this dialogue between a senior-level follower of Tantric Buddhism and guides at a museum that exhibits many Buddhist icons, a lot had been learned and a bridge had been formed, to narrow the gap between the communities of faith and art. A few days later I requested those who had been there to send me their takeaways from that morning. I encapsulate here what they recalled, to give everyone a little flavour of what was discussed.

Almost everyone picked a few of the most intriguing icons – Simhavaktra, who straddles AR2 and draws the viewer in with her fierce expression and her nakedness; the ceremonial apron made of human bones; the *Yab-Yum* creatures locked in sexual embrace. Abha asked about the charnel-ground imagery on the portable shrine and Geshe Damdul

replied that, “it is a reminder that we are not just our body, which ends up like this, but that there is much more to aspire to, namely liberation” (from the endless cycle of births, deaths and rebirths).

Darlene was particularly impressed by the strong respect Geshe la showed for the docents’ role when disseminating



The Yab-Yum (father-mother) statue



Simhavaktra, the fierce-looking dakini

* In the Tibetan language, 'la' is an honorific attached to a name or title as a mark of respect.



The ceremonial bone apron on display in the gallery

important and accurate information about the various artefacts to museum visitors. He himself gave them valuable pointers to help them improve the visitors' museum experience beyond just reading captions and text panels.

He also discussed the larger topic of how various art objects are used in actual religious rituals and practices that bring them 'alive' and explained their complex symbolism. He told us that in a religious setting, many Tantric Buddhist rituals and objects are used/seen only by advanced practitioners who have attained a high level of knowledge and experiential understanding. They are screened off from others who may not be able to grasp the deeper significance and meaning attached to them. He felt it was important for museum labels to mention this, and their significance and utilisation in the context of faith, so that visitors do not take away mistaken ideas about Tantric practices.

Among the ACM artefacts normally seen only by highly-realised practitioners in religious settings are the Simhavaktra statue, skull cups, bone aprons, as well as the *Yab-Yum* deities. He mentioned what I often reiterate, that the most common Tantric/Vajrayana ritual objects, which can be seen by everyone, are the thunderbolt and bell, symbolizing the inextricable union of compassion and transcendental wisdom on the path to enlightenment, which ensures liberation from endless cycles in *samsara* (rebirth).



Cabinet with painted cremation ground, photo by the author

Simhavaktra, a lion-faced *dakini* or female sky-walker, is available only to an advanced practitioner. She typifies an enlightened female figure who is filled with fierce energy and has thrown off conventional proprieties such as clothing. Simhavaktra looks aggressive and ferocious, her eyes popping out, her hair like fiery flames, naked except for a flayed human skin on her back. This cape symbolizes the impermanence of the material world, including our bodies, as well as our fear of death. To liberate ourselves we need to go beyond such fears. The curved knife in her right hand is to forcefully cut off negativities. She is wrathful not against humans, but against negativities such as greed, fear, jealousy, self-cherishing, and our constant focus on 'me, me, me'. In

a temple setting, she would not be on show for all to see, as in a museum, but screened off behind a curtain, revealed only to those who would not be scared away, and would know how to harness her power and help.

The use of human bones in the ceremonial bone apron again reminds us of the impermanence of the body, the physical self. I have seen monks from the Dalai Lama's Namgyal Monastery doing a ritual dance, with one of them wearing this apron, during the lead-up to the world-famous Kalachakra empowerment/ initiation. The skull cup reinforces this same realisation quite forcefully and also that too much attention to physical needs and desires distracts us from the real work of staying focused on attaining emotional bliss and enlightenment.

Yab-Yum (Father-Mother) deities show male and female enlightened beings locked in sexual embrace, both nude. These were much misunderstood by the first Europeans to see them and among many, this persists even today. Once again, in Tantric Buddhism, only highly advanced practitioners who have already taken the highest-level initiation (level four) would get to see or practise with such images.



Ceremonial items, bell and thunderbolt, photo by Gisella Harrold

This embrace embodies the complete bliss of enlightenment. The father (*Yab*) stands for the method or active force (the thunderbolt also signifies this) and the mother (*Yum*) for spiritual wisdom (also symbolized by the bell). The two in inextricable union symbolize the attainment of bliss for the welfare of all beings. The imagery of sexual union is chosen specifically because most people readily identify it with blissful moments. But to the advanced practitioner it signifies the bliss of enlightenment, beyond just physical ecstasy.

It was a memorable morning for all of us at the museum. When asked if he had any words of advice for us, he replied, "Be wisely kind to yourself." As I escorted Geshe la back to his residence, he also seemed satisfied and happy with this encounter.

Tara Dhar Hasnain has many years of teaching experience in international education. Currently she edits books, mainly for Marshall Cavendish International. She gives talks at the museum, especially on Buddhist topics, and enjoys writing for *PASSAGE* magazine.

Unless otherwise noted, photos by Andra Leo

European Ceramics for the Malay World

By Rossman Ithnain

I recently came across a cluster of plates exhibited in one of the galleries at the Malay Heritage Centre in Kampong Glam. They looked European to me. These plates, especially the *Asahan* plate, immediately brought back memories of my childhood when my father and I attended many *kenduri* (religious gatherings). At the end of each gathering, food would be served on either an enamel tray or on a large brown *Asahan* serving dish. Rice, with dishes such as *nasi ambeng* (a Javanese dish comprising rice served with other dishes) and *nasi minyak* (ghee and spice-flavoured rice) would be served communal style, with each tray shared by four persons.

Generally, there are two types of European ceramic wares that found their way to the Malay world in Southeast Asia during the 19th to the mid-20th century. These wares are differentiated by the methods of decoration namely (i) transfer printing and (ii) hand decoration by way of sponge printing or painting or a combination thereof. These European (predominantly English, Scottish, Dutch and French) wares were lucrative exports to the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Two European manufacturers were particularly popular with the Malay communities: J & M P Bell of Glasgow, Scotland, and Petrus Regout of Maastricht, Holland.

Established in 1841, J & M P Bell exported large numbers of transfer printed plates/wares to Southeast Asia. The design of Bell's Malay series with its localised patterns resonated well with the Malay market. The series included patterns of places such as Johore, Macassar and Kelantan, animals, *buah* (fruit) including *nanas* (pineapple), *kapal besar* (big ship), phrases such as *terlalu bagus* (exceedingly good), as well as mythical animals such as the *keelin* (qilin) and *burung hong* (phoenix). There are Bell pieces with these pattern names spelled out in Jawi script.

This was a clever marketing tactic since these wares were targeted at the Malay market. The firm, J & M P Bell,

was founded by two brothers, John and Matthew Perston Bell. The older brother, John, later became a ship owner in Rangoon (now Yangon) to further facilitate the export of his Scottish wares to Southeast Asia. This firm was the most successful in the history of Scottish pottery. J & M P Bell wares are either monochrome (red, blue, green and brown) or two-coloured.

Petrus Regout ware was named after its founder and was originally called *Sphinx Pottery*. This Maastricht-based firm went through several name changes and was in business from 1834 till the late 20th century. Wares with floral designs and a crescent moon and star motif were primarily targeted at the Malay market. There were also 'oriental' or 'chinoiserie' designs that appealed to the Malays. Other patterns they used included animals (even mythological ones), fruit, flowers, scenery, geometric patterns and people, all designed to appeal to local tastes. Some of the Petrus Regout wares have markings on their undersides – "Petrus Regout" and "Maastricht" written in Javanese script. I was told that this script was *Aksara muda*, a type of script similar to the 26-letter Javanese *Hanacaraka*, but with fewer letters. These wares were clearly meant for the Indonesian market.

It is not surprising that Dutch wares found favour in Indonesia as it was once the Dutch East Indies. Although meant for the Indonesian market, Petrus



Petrus Regout Sphinx mark and Javanese Aksara mark



Typical blue *Asahan* plate



A green *Asahan* plate



Petrus Regout plate with a crescent moon and star in the centre and a floral design around the edge



Popular Petrus Regout pattern

Regout wares with Javanese marks could also be found in Singapore and Malaysia. One specific pattern with a key fret motif was particularly liked. This design came in several colours: brown, blue, red and green. A plate with this motif is commonly referred to as *Pinggán Asahan*. I was told that *Asahan* comes from the Turkish word *sahan* which means plate. The word *sahan* must have found its way into Malay vocabulary and evolved to become *Pinggán Asahan*, referring to Maastricht wares generally. *Asahan* plates, especially the large serving plates (almost like trays) were also popular with the Malays in North Sumatra.



J & M P Bell mark with Jawi script – *terlalu baik* (exceedingly good)

The transfer printing technique in particular allowed designs/patterns to be produced identically in large numbers, enabling these plates to be sold commercially throughout the world, including the Malay world. I have come across and purchased such plates in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. These ceramic pieces were meant for daily use especially



J & M P Bell plate mark with buah buah (fruits) on it

by middle-class Malay families. Many were large bowls and plates that were heavy and sturdy. The brown *Asahan* plate (a brown plate with key fret motifs) was subsequently copied and produced in China and Japan. The Chinese and Japanese pieces were lighter and more competitively priced than the European ones.

Over time, these daily-use pieces became prized by Malay women.

Malays are house proud and would prominently display these plates as part of their home décor. Being imported European plates, they were a source of pride. These plates would also be used at communal events such as *kenduri*, weddings, celebrations and events at the mosques. On such occasions, the meals would typically be shared by four people. For easy identification, these pieces were marked with the owner's initials on the underside.

Since Malays eat with their hands, small rice bowls were not found in their households. They had no use for them, unlike in Chinese households. Large bowls were meant to serve dishes with *kuah* (gravy) such as curry and *lauk lemak* (having a coconut milk base) dishes. Small bowl-like cups were used for drinking. In the spirit of *gotong royong* (community spirit), families and friends in the community would rally together and contribute cooking ingredients – spices, rice, sugar and utensils such as plates, cups and glasses, anything and everything that might be needed for wedding celebrations and the accompanying communal meals. Such was the kampong spirit of the past. Today, many of these plates are antiques and are found in the region's museums. They are hardly ever used in households any more, nor seen at Malay events.



Examples of European export ware for the Malay world, from various producers

Rossman Ithnain is a civil servant with a passion for collecting things from the Malay world, past and present.

Photos by the author

On the Road with an Ukiyo-e Master

By Seema Shah

In 1901, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie sold his business and dedicated his time to expanding his philanthropic interests, including the establishment of several noteworthy institutions such as Carnegie Mellon University and the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh. Among the museums' many spectacular holdings is the complete set of master printmaker Utagawa Hiroshige's (1797-1858) *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*, undoubtedly the most celebrated works of Japanese art. This spring the collection was showcased for the first time in 25 years at the Carnegie Museum of Arts and I had the privilege of attending both a series of lectures on Japanese woodblock prints, as well as touring the exhibition in the company of its curator Akemi May.



The 12th station on the Tokaido, with the Mishima Shrine masterfully silhouetted in the morning mist.



Nihonbashi Bridge, the starting point of the Tokaido. A daimyo's procession jostles for space amongst a group of fishmongers

The set of 55 woodblock prints created between 1831 and 1834 are from the first (*Hoeido*) edition and capture the delicate beauty of Japanese landscapes and the fascinating characters encountered by the artist on his journey on the eastern sea route, the Tokaido, the arterial road of feudal Japan. This coastal stretch ran for roughly 500 kilometres between the imperial city of Kyoto, where the emperor resided, and the city of Edo (modern Tokyo) that served as the new capital of the then ruling Tokugawa shogunate. Fifty-three post stations punctuated this route, providing travellers, (usually samurai and government officials) with stables, food and lodging.

The Edo period (1615-1868) refers to the relatively peaceful 250 years during which the Tokugawa shoguns ruled Japan and made Edo the seat of power. It was also a time when the country was largely in seclusion. Japanese citizens were forbidden from leaving the country and all foreigners, with the exception of the Dutch, were prohibited from trading or entering. This period also saw the rise of the *chonin* or merchant class, who although wealthy, had long held low social status. It was this inability to rise in the social system that caused much of their spare energy and wealth to be spent in diversions, centred around the *Yoshiwara*, a walled area where brothels, teahouses and theatres abounded. These were arenas where they could participate on an equal basis with the elite upper classes (warriors, farmers and artisans). As a result, a thriving popular culture arose, dominated by *Kabuki* theatre and *ukiyo-e* prints.

Originally a Buddhist term, *ukiyo* or 'the floating world' referred to the transient nature of earthly existence. In

Edo-period Japan it came to refer to the pleasure-seeking amusements of the *chonin*. Pictures depicting this hedonistic lifestyle came to be known as *ukiyo-e*, with depictions of geishas, courtesans, wrestlers and Kabuki actors being major themes. Today the term is used to describe woodblock prints in general.

The technology of woodblock printing had existed since the Tang dynasty in China, although it was mostly used for copying Buddhist texts. Mass production of woodblock images in Japan began only during the 1600s and the early monochromatic images frequently referred to themes from classical, literary and historical sources. The 17th century saw artists beginning to add colour by hand, including red, blue, yellow and orange and by the mid-18th century, multi-colour printing produced single prints, built up in layers of aligned blocks, each carrying different colours and design. They were called *nishiki-e* because they were as beautiful as *nishiki*, a silk fabric, and they became the new craze in Edo. Erotic works and images of actors and beautiful women were common subjects in early *ukiyo-e*.

However, the landscape print was a new genre, pioneered by Hiroshige's contemporary, Katsushika Hokusai. His series, *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, had just been issued and met with unprecedented success. It was against this backdrop that Hiroshige came to design his first Tokaido set.

The eastern road was vital to the political stability of the



Hiroshige depicts famous landmarks such as the teahouse in Mariko, reportedly still in operation



Best-known scene from this series, Sudden Shower at Shono illustrates Hiroshige's genius at capturing the sensation of a violent rainstorm

ruling Tokugawa shogunate and a channel for administration and transportation. Travel on the Tokaido was highly regulated and most people never left their home towns since travel for pleasure was prohibited. The route passed through several provinces with numerous checkpoints where travellers had to present permits or be turned back.

The next best thing to travel was to collect *ukiyo-e*, prints of places the burgeoning middle class would never see in person. Publishers started offering "fictional guidebooks" to these armchair travellers, promising they could "view landscapes without having to take a single step." Over time, the road to Tokaido took on legendary proportions with texts and illustrations highlighting its adventure, cuisine and beautiful women.



Board game based on the fifty-three stations of the Tokaido

Hiroshige's ability to create designs that conveyed the intimacy of life on the road was made possible when in the summer of 1832, he accompanied an entourage of government officials from Edo to Kyoto. Most writers and artists who featured the Tokaido road in their works, had never made the trip. Their illustrations and texts were based solely on word of mouth or from previously published material. Hiroshige not only made sketches of the incidents he witnessed at the stations along the way, he also vividly captured famous buildings, mountains, rivers and trees. More importantly, he did not omit details of the fascinating travellers he encountered.

Profoundly affected by his travels, he began work on the first set of his prints on his arrival back home. Two years later he published *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido* and with this first set, Hiroshige found his audience and style. There were 55 prints in the series, as it included not only the 53 stations on the road, but also the starting point of the *Nihon-bashi* (Japan Bridge) in central Edo and the ending at Kyoto.

Why was Hiroshige's first set so wildly popular? Why did it resonate so deeply with the people? The qualities that Hiroshige chose to express were precisely what the

public longed for. His contemporaries, such as Hokusai and Kuniyoshi, failed to capture the poetry of the landscape and the humour of travel. Individually and as a group, Hiroshige's works conveyed a deep sense of freedom, intelligence, warmth and exuberance. The freedom showed in his choice of subjects and the constantly changing point of view. He was sometimes on the level of his subject and at other times, he used bird's eye views. Awkward peasants and travellers were portrayed with dignity as was the care with which he noted different kinds of foliage.

Furthermore, Hiroshige's images masterfully capture the atmosphere of the journey, in all kinds of weather and during all the seasons. He was superb at creating the effects of rain, snow and wind in what is a very difficult medium, the carved wooden block. One of the set's most celebrated prints, *Sudden Shower at Shōno*, demonstrates Hiroshige's genius at capturing the sensation of a violent rainstorm. Palanquin bearers and villagers dash through the storm and sheets of rain are represented with distinct slanted lines.



Hiroshige made early and prolific use of the new Prussian blue in his landscapes

Another noteworthy technical achievement was his use of the recently introduced western pigment known as Berlin or Prussian blue, which became commercially available in Japan from the mid-1820s. The brilliantly coloured Prussian blue gave artists much greater freedom of expression in the depiction of the sky and water. It was particularly effective when it represented colour gradation known as *bokashi*, in which printers wiped and diluted the amount of pigment applied to the woodblock. The success of Hiroshige's designs depended largely on the skillful use of *bokashi* colour gradation to highlight the mood of rainfall, mist or snow.

Each of the 53 official post stations had its own character and its own special products. Okazaki, with its long, curving bridge, Mariko a popular teahouse along the way or the town of Arimatsu, famous for its tie-dyed cotton fabrics – Hiroshige elegantly portrayed each one in his vivid and delicate style. No Japanese artist had expressed a greater love for the people and their land as did Hiroshige in these early landscape sets.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the Tokaido was more of a tourist attraction than a functional road. Artists continued to seek inspiration by travelling the sections that still remained. Hiroshige went on to design nearly 20 different Tokaido series during his final years, but the *Hoeido Tokaido* remains his most brilliant work, one that elevated him to being the greatest Japanese woodblock artist that ever lived. In portraying the "floating world" of Japan under the iron control of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Hiroshige fixed the images for eternity.

Photos courtesy of The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, USA

A Sculptor Meets His New Match in Paper

Aaron Curry at STPI

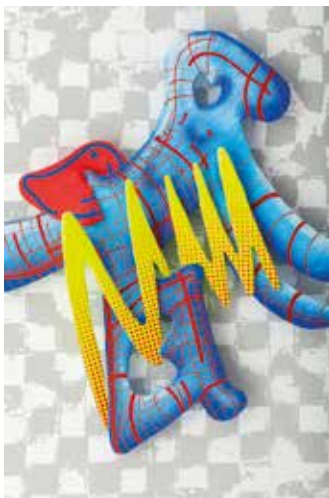
By Seema Devitre

Aaron Curry, a sculptor from Los Angeles, recently completed his residency at STPI, a creative workshop for innovation in printmaking and paper art. Having created a formidable breadth of work, ranging from edgy sculptures hanging from rafters to soft, breathy aquatints reminiscent of watercolour, Curry brings to Singapore his electric sensibility, one that is evocative of the Cubist and Surreal art movements of our time.

Born in 1972, Curry grew up in San Antonio, Texas, skateboarding, BMX biking and listening incessantly to a myriad of musical genres. Immersed in styles from rock and jazz to punk, it was the guitar that eventually stood out for Curry, both in sound and form. After receiving a BFA at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2002, Curry spent a total of 10 years engaging with the Chicago Imagists and The Hairy Who, representational artists exhibiting together since the late 1960s. Curry moved to Los Angeles where he received his MFA in 2005 from the Art Centre College of Design in Pasadena.



Aaron Curry with some of his works at the STPI Creative Workshop and Gallery



We R 24 (detail), 2018, Screen-print on Dibond wrapped with STPI handmade mixed cotton and abaca paper, gampi paper; mounted on fine art printed Awagami bamboo paper on aluminium panel, 107.8 x 150 x 11 cm

His career then catapulted and Curry has become one of the leading modernists of our time, first a painter and eventually, through layering and collage, a sculptor.

When he arrived at STPI, Curry had no preconceived notions and had never before made paper. Amazed at how comfortable he felt, Curry channelled a stream of consciousness work ethic, shaping thin aluminium sheets and wrapping them in paper pulp, which he airbrushed with layer upon layer of coloured paper and then silkscreened with images from his drawings, some positive and some negative. In the *Ultramarine Grid-Trip* series, the blue grid gives

dimension, the lines depict depth. We see shapes that are a part of his language, forms of the guitar and the abstraction of body parts. These pieces displayed upon on a wall of his enlarged drawings, immediately put the viewer into a field that appears boundless, reverberating with sound and a never-ending perspective. This dichotomy is a feature of Curry's works, where a two-dimensional plane appears three-dimensional on an otherwise flat surface.

Curry's technique uses found materials such as magazines, cardboard boxes and plywood queried paper.

In these cases, colour sits on top of surfaces, whereas handmade paper absorbs colour itself. Some shapes reference skateboard ramps and patterns that float between dimensions. In the *Fragments (The Collective is Disseminated)* series, a checkerboard backdrop supports collages evoking star clusters. The pattern made by a stencil was used like a stamp to create an organic field, once again pulling the viewer between the 2D and 3D spaces. The *Glow (Pizza Bones in An Idea Box)* series features black and white works with dot illustrations that reference graphic comics. Curry pushed the newsprint Ben-Day dot technique to feel erased, portraying a vibrating half-tone if you will. These works emit a mysterious fluorescent yellow glow, giving them an aura and further moving them between dimensions. But it is Curry's etchings and lithographs that truly pushed his boundaries. Nestled in the Corner Store, Curry's *Scratch (Idea Box)* series depicts great detail in drawing, a measured technique in printmaking and a sensitivity that launched him out of his comfort zone. And who knew, Curry even had the opportunity to design his first skateboard, embarking on yet another platform to consider.

This is Aaron Curry's first solo exhibition in Southeast Asia. The exhibition runs at STPI until 17 November. Guided tours are Thursdays at 11:30 am and Saturdays at 2:00 pm.

Seema Devitre is a docent at STPI and the IHC. This year she celebrates 10 years of living in Singapore. Seema has previously worked in New York at the Whitney Museum of American Art and World Music Institute.

All photos © STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery

Former Ford Factory: The Disillusionment of British Colonialism

By Tina Walton

“The British left us with the impression that Singapore was impregnable... No one thought for a moment that the Japanese would really attack. We thought that it was just a bluff.” (Oral history interview with Lee Kip Lin [1984]). *“The worst disaster and the largest capitulation of the British military.”* (Winston Churchill, 15 February 1942)

Through the art deco façade of the Ford Factory Museum, I walk back in time to the former assembly plant, the first of its kind in Southeast Asia. Opened in 1941, its commercial use was brief owing to the impending war when the plant was promptly converted to an aircraft assembly ground for the British Royal Air Force.

The small reception area highlights the factory’s intended purpose: on the wall across from the reception desk hangs an old, colour advertisement of the Ford Standard Special Model 1941, while on the adjacent wall, André De La Varre’s 1938 *The Screen Traveller: Singapore Crossroads of the East* plays on a continuous loop, illustrating the ideal market in Southeast Asia. I pause, mesmerised by the old footage of familiar landmarks and the vibrant life of yesteryear. Not much seems to have changed; commerce and trade still dominate life in Singapore. In the film, lorries and rickshaws loaded with wares and passengers careen through the streets, while commercial bumboats jam the waterways along the Singapore River. The footage also captures the quotidian: a young Chinese girl hanging out the washing, an *amah* taking care of an Anglo child, and an Indian barber plying his trade in the open market. In short, daily life in prewar Singapore was peacefully bustling with economic activity.

But it’s 1938, and the film doesn’t neglect to show the prewar preparations of aerial drills, naval ships, and a melee of Anglo, Indian and Malay troops. There’s a sense of preparedness and assurance for Singapore’s residents, with not of hint of the disaster that lies ahead during the next four years.



The Ford Motor Company’s colour ad highlighting the many features of the Standard Special Model, circa 1941



The Ford Factory as it stands today on Bukit Timah Road. The museum preserved façade, with apartment buildings and the radio tower at the back

In the *Fall of Singapore* exhibition room, prewar tension and missteps are explained: the British army’s lack of trained soldiers and supplies along with their major tactical error – preparing for a naval assault that left the Malay Peninsula exposed. The Japanese invasion of Malaya, in near tandem with its attack on Pearl Harbor, marked the beginning of the Malay Campaign that eventually led the Japanese army down to Singapore.

In this exhibition room, the Japanese army’s tactical map reveals its invasion plan of Singapore. Within three months, the battle-hardened Japanese troops accepted the full surrender of the British military. In the Surrender Chamber, the signing of the “largest capitulation” is preserved, the wall clock frozen at 6:20 pm when British Lieutenant General Arthur Percival signed the surrender treaty to Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita of the Japanese army.

Down the corridor from the time-capsule room, the *Becoming Syonan Exhibition* documents a darker period in Singapore history, when Japan renamed the occupied state *Syonan*, (Light of the South). Roughly 3,000 Allied POWs – British, Australian, Malay and Indian – were rounded up and crammed into Changi Prison, a facility designed for about 800 inmates.

However, the worst brutality fell upon the local Chinese when the *sook ching*, the purging of Chinese males perceived as hostile by the Japanese occupiers, took thousands of lives. In this exhibition, the survivors’ oral narratives powerfully recount the personal tragedies of the *Syonan* period, providing a stark contrast with the travelogue of colonial Singapore.

For the many disillusioned locals, Singapore’s colonial tradition could not endure; indeed, after the Japanese surrender in 1945, it was the beginning of the end for British colonialism. The *Legacies of War and Occupation* exhibition tells of Singapore’s return to the British and its aftermath.

Tina Walton is a Korean-American writer and a life-long learner. She writes children’s and young adult fiction and teaches English in Singapore. Her historical fiction manuscript, *Last Days of the Morning Calm*, was short-listed for the 2018 Scholastic Asian Book Award and publication is forthcoming.

Photos by the author

A Conference on Post-1970 Southeast Asian Art and Discourse

By Iola Lenzi

Art and Action is an international art history conference that critically examines the development of art practices in Southeast Asia from the 1970s to the present. It focuses on the role of artists and artworks as social conduits, with the aim of generating discourses specific to the contexts and conditions of the region.

Since the 1996 opening of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), Singapore has positioned itself as a global centre for Southeast Asian contemporary art exhibitions and study. The national collection of regional contemporary art has grown and numerous exhibitions presenting Southeast Asian contemporary practice have been mounted in Singapore and abroad. A few of these have been research-oriented, some examining the region as a whole, such as the synthesising, transregional six-country *Negotiating Home, History and Nation* that I guest-curated at SAM in 2011.

But multi-essay catalogues and anthologies delving deep into regional discourses are rare, as are comparative accounts of Southeast Asian contemporary art covering more than a few countries. To address this dearth, an academic conference that examines five decades of Southeast Asian contemporary art transnationally, will be convened this December at LASALLE College of the Arts, in Singapore. The international meeting falls under the aegis of the school's well-established Masters in Asian Arts Programme, which focuses on 20th century art in Asia.

Art and Action: Contemporary Art and Discourse in Southeast Asia, being held from 3-5 December, examines art that, after 1970, responded to fractious social contexts. This new art expanded from official institutional settings and discourses, often co-opting public space and engaging wide audiences in critical and sometimes social topics. Regional art has evolved since the 1970s yet has retained its distinctive active character, visible in the production of numerous current-generation artists.

The conference has opted to address a comparative observation of practices over time and across the region, thus revealing a continuing attachment to a number of themes and approaches. With the goal of building contextually relevant



FX Harsono, *Writing in the Rain*, 2011, Single channel video. Director, FX Harsono; cinematographer and videographer team, Alex Ginting and IndoXPLORE; technical assistant, Hendriawan. Photo courtesy of Harsono

theoretical frameworks, *Art and Action* is structured around six thematic panels that through the papers presented, look at topics and polemics arising out of Southeast Asian contemporary art, specifically those that can be linked to local contexts. *Old Codes New Meanings: aspects of tradition in contemporary Southeast Asian art* re-examines the relevance of ties binding art and tradition for the study of Southeast Asian contemporary art. *Stealing Public Space: how Southeast Asian contemporary art engages with the city* examines the ways in which regional art critically engages with the city as collectively owned, and all it represents. *Direct Dissemination: comics and popular media* focuses on visual and text media such as comics, posters and murals circulated in the public domain. Beyond tangible media, the panel also reflects upon digital genres as conduits of social artistic expression. *Clue and Cue: the place of text in contemporary Southeast Asian art* considers recent decades' text-image meshing in regional visual practices. *Not Lagging - Sometimes Leading: Tracing the Implications of Technological Parity* explores works produced with mass-image technologies to examine the extent to which this art's aesthetic vision, thematic concerns and technical virtuosity are contingent upon local contexts. Finally, *Daring Canon: assessing art historical narratives of Southeast Asian contemporary art* examines canon-making from a range of perspectives.

Additional third-day panels include one devoted to *The Artists Village* and a specially convened Artists' Panel, including multimedia artists Arahmaiani (Indonesia), Imelda Cajipe-Endaya (the Philippines) Yee I-Lann (Malaysia), and S Chandrasekaran (Singapore). An exhibition of contemporary art from Southeast Asia, *Moving Pledges*, at LASALLE's Institute of Contemporary Art as well as various cultural tours, complete the conference line-up. Special speakers include distinguished art historians John Clark, Terry Smith, Marian Pastor Roces and celebrated cartoonist Sonny Liew.



Amanda Heng, *Let's Chat*, Ongoing from 1996; this version 2015, Goethe Institute, Hanoi. Participative performance. Photo by Iola Lenzi

Iola Lenzi is a conference co-convenor and lecturer in LASALLE's MA of Asian Art Histories programme.

Monday Morning Lectures

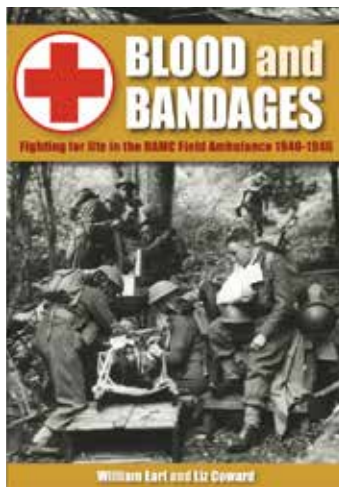


Monday Morning Lectures will be held in the Ngee Ann Auditorium (in the basement) or in the River Room (level 2), the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), 1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555 and will begin promptly at 11:00 am. Refreshments will be provided. Latecomers are asked to enter via the rear door.

5 November: NO LECTURE (public holiday) Happy Deepavali!

12 November: Witnesses to War: Fighting for Life in the RAMC Field Ambulance 1940-1946

Speaker: Liz Coward
Venue: The River Room (level 2)



Echoing the National Museum of Singapore's initiative last year, in remembrance of the events of World War II, this compelling talk explains the role of the Royal Army Medical Corps Field Ambulance during the war. Based on the unique accounts of Private William Earl, a nursing orderly, as well as contemporary war diaries, Liz Coward recounts the stories of the non-combatants who fought

to save lives and retain their humanity in the battlefields of North Africa and Italy.

19 November: The Land of the Buddha: Pilgrimage Circuit

Speaker: Abha Kaul
Venue: The Ngee Ann Auditorium (in the basement)



India is the land of the Buddha's birth, where he spent 50 years searching for answers to life's most profound questions and then showing the way to others, once he had attained enlightenment. This talk will take you on a virtual journey to the high places of Buddhism – Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar. You will also 'visit' these less-travelled but renowned spots – Kapilavastu, Shravasti,

Vaishali and Nalanda. Come share the discoveries of a recent FOM study tour to these sites, learn about the Buddha's life, and enjoy hearing more about India's priceless legacy to the world through Buddhist ideas, art and architecture.

26 November: Of Ministers, Old Men and Funny Tourists: An Introduction to the World of Balinese Masked Theatre

Speaker: Irving Chan Johnson
Venue: The River Room (level 2)



This talk focuses on masking as it is used in Balinese theatrical forms. The lecture looks primarily at the genre of *Topeng*, Bali's most common form of masked theatre, focusing on its history, ritual content, masks and the social context. The second part of the lecture will be a short demonstration of acting roles in the *Topeng* drama.

3 December: Hidden Messages of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel

Speaker: Fabrizio Righi
Venue location at ACM: The Ngee Ann Auditorium (in the basement)



In the heart of the Roman Catholic Church is the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican, where paintings of extreme beauty were meant to render the holy scriptures understandable, but revealed some controversy: the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* is painted as a fig and not an apple tree; the choice of painted prophets and sibyls is uncommon; colours, perspectives and shapes seem to have a specific philosophy and

concealed symbolism. The Italian Renaissance's greatest artist, Michelangelo Buonarroti, left some hidden messages for us to discover.

After 3 December, there will be more NO LECTURES in December 2018.

MMLs will be on a holiday break for the rest of December. Lectures will resume in January. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all those who celebrate!

Explore Singapore!

To join an ES! event, please go to the FOM website to register online or register at the ES! table at any Monday Morning Lecture.



Secrets of a Good Soya Sauce

Thursday 8 November
10.00 am – 12:30 pm
Fee: \$35 (including lunch)

Soy sauce (or soya sauce) is a ubiquitous condiment used by Chinese people throughout the world. The history of soy sauce goes back more than 2,000 years when it was first created in China during the Western Han dynasty. The sauce was introduced to Japan by

Buddhist monks in the seventh century, but Korea seems to have begun its own brewing prior to the sixth century BCE.

Over the years, soy sauce became widely used as an important flavouring and is now integrated into the cuisines of many East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, although the sauces made in each country differ in taste.

If you are curious about how this indispensable sauce is made, join our tour to find out. We will visit a soy sauce brewery that uses the traditional method of making the sauce and learn about the many steps and natural ingredients needed to make a superior sauce. After a tour of the brewery we will attend a workshop to taste and learn how to discern different types of sauces and pair them with different foods in a lunch (included).



Bras Basah Bugis Heritage Walk

Thursday 15 November
10.00 am – 12:00 noon
Fee: \$25

Join Explore Singapore! on this walk around the Bras Basah Bugis precinct to learn about the various sites of religious worship and the multitude of communities that used to live, work and worship here in the heart of the city. The walk will encompass churches,

Hindu and Buddhist temples, a mosque, a Jewish synagogue and many more sites, including the arts precinct and the once-bustling Queen Street bazaar. Let us explore the many different styles of architecture and the changes that have taken place in the last few years. This neighbourhood has been, and still is, a significant urban space for many diverse communities.

Al Abrar Masjid and the Nagore Dargah Shrine

Thursday 29 November
10.00 am – 12:00 noon
Fee: \$25



There are two very special buildings in Telok Ayer Street in Chinatown. Both tell the story of the traders who came from the Coromandel Coast of India long ago. This

Muslim community had a long and hazardous journey and built these two structures to give thanks for their safe arrival here in Singapore. Come with us to hear from the imam of the mosque about the history of this striking building. Then find out why the beautiful and intricately designed Nagore Dargar Shrine was built in 1828 by these early immigrants.

The Jewel on Phoenix Hill – Hong San See Temple

Thursday 6 December
10.00 am – 12:00 noon
Fee: \$25



In the middle of the city, in a commercial area of hip restaurants, shops, pubs and offices is a jewel of a Chinese temple. *Hong San See* (the

Temple of Phoenix Hill), a gazetted national monument, was built between 1908 and 1913 by the Lam Ann Association (a Hokkien clan group) and has since undergone a few renovations. Its most recent renovation (2006–2009) was accorded the 2010 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation: Award for Excellence. It beat 33 other entries from 14 countries.

Join this Explore Singapore! tour guided by a member of the Lam Ann Association to learn about the history and restoration of the temple and to enjoy the visual feast of exquisite Southern Chinese temple architecture. The temple has one of the finest wood carvings in Singapore. Our guide will explain the fascinating story of the deity to whom the temple is dedicated and talk about some Chinese Daoist temple customs. You will also discover the link between Singapore's war hero Lim Bo Seng and the temple.

Textile Enthusiasts Group

Programme 1: Threads of Strength

Speaker: Kaveri Lalchand

Date: Friday 16 November

Time: Arrive at 10:00 am for 10:30 start

Hostess: Janet Stride

Online Registration: Textile Enthusiasts Group at www.fom.sg

Linen is one of the world's oldest and most valued fabrics. Join designer Kaveri Lalchand for a talk about the history of linen, its positive properties and what makes it so appealing. Life, like linen, is better relaxed.

We will also have a reading of a few poems about women, clothes, shopping and life, plus a discussion of how the clothes we wear shape us, stereotype us or leave us open to judgement from outside and within.



About the Speaker

Based in her hometown of Chennai, Kaveri Lalchand is a clothes-maker who crafts stylish, impressive and inherently comfortable clothes, exclusively in linen, for women of all ages and life contexts. She has an international presence in Europe, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The brand *Kaveri* is a free-flowing articulation of its maker's spirit and celebrates the importance of comfortable garments that have the potential to empower women – of all kinds and sizes – to feel beautiful, and loved, every day. Kaveri is a strong supporter of traditional Indian craft and textiles and has worked closely with the Crafts Council of India to preserve and promote these art forms.

Programme 2: Drinks and Dresses

Date: Friday 30 November

Time: 7:00 pm

Host: Peter Lee

Online Registration: Textile Enthusiasts Group at www.fom.sg

Celebrate the festive season with textiles and style. Dress up in your favourite ethnic or hand-crafted textiles and join TEG at the elegant home of Peranakan scholar and collector Peter Lee. Peter will have a few pieces from his textile collection on display for us to enjoy. Spouses are welcome and are encouraged to participate in the 'textile spirit'.

About Peter

Peter Lee is an independent scholar, author, and the honorary curator of the Baba House. In 2016, Peter was a guest curator of *Port Cities: Multicultural Emporiiums of Asia, 1500–1900*. His family's collection of textiles focuses on the links between batik and Indian trade textiles and how both are very much part of an interconnected history. The collection comprises mainly batiks from the north coast of Java, and Indian trade cloths made for Europe, Japan, Iran, Sri Lanka and the Malay Archipelago.



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The Most Exciting Experience I Ever Had as a Docent

The special exhibition *Treasures of the World from the British Museum* was held at NMS from 2015 to 2016. My guiding experience when giving a tour of this exhibition, has become my favourite memory.

The British Museum is home to an astonishing range of objects from cultures across the world – a mummy’s mask from Egypt, the Luis Chessmen from Scotland, the bust of the emperor Hadrian from Rome, a tablet from Ashurbanipal’s Library from Iraq, and a small but beautiful figure of a pregnant woman from the Cycladic Islands.

From among these, I focused on two artefacts – a stone hand-axe and a Mayan lintel. The stone hand-axe is a genuine masterpiece of the toolmaker’s art, displayed at the entrance to the gallery. Another special piece is the Mayan lintel. Personally speaking, for me this is the most touching exhibit. This lintel is originally from Yaxchilan, Mexico. I have been to Mexico about 20 times to see an archaeologist who has been friends with me since high school. Today he is the senior manager of the Yaxchilan ruins. We have discussed Mayan civilisation, including this lintel, lots of times. I was finally able to look at this lintel up close and besides that, explain its history in a museum.



Joining the orientation meeting, I believed that all these ancient artefacts would carry people away. I became motivated and excited by the thought of guiding this tour. Nevertheless, my favourite gallery is the whole of ACM. I unflinchingly feel in good spirits when I’m there. Always!

Jay B Adachi, Japanese docent



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Applications open till 15 November 2018 for the August 2019 intake

For more information, visit www.adm.ntu.edu.sg/Programmes
 @ ADM_GraduateProg@ntu.edu.sg



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www.ntu.edu.sg
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Coordinators Contact List



ACM – Joanna Boot & Michelle Hertz
acmcoordinators@gmail.com



GB – Alka Kapoor & Isabel Urrutia
gb.outreach@gmail.com



IHC – Jyoti Ramesh
coordinator.ihc@gmail.com



MHC – Chong Yit Peng
mhccoordinator@yahoo.com



NMS – Alison Kennedy-Cooke & Lim Yuen Ping
nmscoordinators@yahoo.com



TPM – Angela Kek
angelakek@yahoo.com.sg



SAM – Maisy Koh
sam.coordinator@yahoo.com.sg



STPI – Ikumi Fushimi & Virginie Labbe
stpicoordinators@yahoo.com



SYSNMH – Karen Ng
sysnmhcoordinator@yahoo.com



URA Heritage Trails – Heather Muirhead
URAcordinators@gmail.com
Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails – Heather Muirhead
Kgcoordinators@gmail.com

JDs
jdcoordinator1@yahoo.co.jp and jdcoordinator2@yahoo.co.jp

Heritage Trails



The **URA/FOM Heritage Trails** are held every Friday and Saturday morning around the four precincts of Chinatown. Registration for these is on the eventbrite.sg website under Heritage Trails. The tours are two hours long and are free to the public.

The **MHF/FOM Heritage Trails** are held every fourth Wednesday and Saturday. They are held twice a month, but only one Wednesday and one Saturday each month. Registration for these is also on the eventbrite.sg website under Heritage Trails. These are one and a half hours long and free to the public.

For information regarding dates, please check our website.

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Asian Civilisations Museum

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555
Tel: 6332 7798
www.acm.org.sg



Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am - 7:00 pm
Fri 10:00 am - 9:00 pm

FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am, 12:30 pm, 2:00 pm and 3:30 pm, Fri 7:00 pm (English)
Mon to Fri 10:30 am and every second Saturday 1:30 pm (Japanese)
First Wed of the month 11.30am (Korean)
Second Thursday of the month 11:30 (Spanish)
Third Thursday of the month 11:30 (French)

Understanding Asia through Singapore

The new and renovated galleries at the ACM use Singapore's history as a port city as a means of understanding the interconnections among Asian cultures and between Asia and the world.

Gillman Barracks

9 Lock Road, Singapore 108937
www.gillmanbarracks.com



A cluster of 11 contemporary art galleries and the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), Gillman Barracks features an ever-changing selection of contemporary art exhibitions.

Opening hours: Tues to Sun – Refer to individual gallery pages on-line for opening hours
Closed Mondays & Public Holidays

FOM guided tours:

Sat 4:00 pm: Art & History Tour
Sat. 5:00 pm: History and Heritage Tour
To register please visit www.fom-gillman-barracks.eventbrite.com

Indian Heritage Centre

5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924
www.indianheritage.org.sg



Open Tuesday to Sunday & public holidays. Closed on Mondays.
Tues to Thurs 10:00 am to 7:00 pm, Fri & Sat 10:00 am to 8:00 pm
Sundays & public holidays 10:00 am to 4:00 pm

FOM guided tours: Tues-Fri

11:00 am for the permanent galleries
3:00 pm on Wed and Fri for the special exhibitions

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) celebrates the history and heritage of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. From early contacts between the Indian subcontinent and this region, the culture and social history of the community after the arrival of the British, through to the early stirrings of nationalism and political identity, and the contributions of Singapore's Indian community – the five galleries take visitors on a fascinating journey through the Indian diaspora. Located in Singapore's colourful and vibrant Little India precinct, the centre opened in May 2015 and is our only purpose-built museum.

Chetti Melaka of the Straits – Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities (through May 2019)

The Chetti Melaka (or Chitty Melaka) are descendants of Tamil traders who settled in Melaka during the reign of the Melaka Sultanate (15th- 16th century) and married local women of Malay and Chinese descent. Predominantly Hindu of the Saivite (followers of Shiva) denomination, the community speaks a unique combination of Malay, Tamil and Chinese, that has been called Chetti Creole by scholars. The IHC presents this exhibition in collaboration with the Association of Peranakan Indians (Chitty Melaka).

Malay Heritage Centre

85 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198501
Tel: 6391 0450
www.malayheritage.org.sg



Opening hours:

Tues to Sun 10:00 am – 6:00 pm (last admission 5:30 pm), closed on Mondays
FOM guided tours: Tues to Fri 11:00 am; Sat: 2:00 pm (Subject to availability. Please call ahead to confirm the availability of a docent).

The Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) provides wonderful cultural exposure and learning opportunities for visitors of all ages and interests. Situated amidst the Istana Kampong Gelam, Gedung Kuning and the surrounding Kampong Gelam precinct, the Centre acts as a vital heritage institution for the Malay community in Singapore. Through its exhibits, programmes and activities, the Centre hopes to honour the past while providing a means for present-day expression.

National Museum of Singapore

93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897
Tel: 6332 3659
www.nationalmuseum.sg



Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am – 7:00 pm

FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am and 2:00 pm (English)
Mon to Fri 10:30 am and every first Saturday 1:30 pm (Japanese)

The Singapore History Gallery

In celebration of 50 years of independence, this gallery has been refreshed with updated stories and content on Singapore's history, capturing the nation's defining moments, challenges and achievements from its earliest beginnings 700 years ago to the independent, modern city-state it is today.

Magic and Menace

Step into the newly refreshed Goh Seng Choo Gallery and explore the world of magic and supernatural beliefs as practised by traditional Southeast Asian societies. Engage in a multisensory discovery experience of plants and animals prized by traditional healers, and learn how they are used for their curative powers or their symbolic or magical properties.

NUS Museum, NUS Centre for the Arts

University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119279
Tel: 6516 8817
www.museum.nus.edu.sg



Free admission

Museum Information and Exhibitions



Opening hours:

Tues to Sat 10:00 am – 6:00 pm, Closed on Sundays and Public Holidays,

Monday: Visits by appointment for schools/faculties only.

Yeo Shih Yun: Diaries, Marking Time And Other Preoccupations (through 27 April 2019)

The exhibition features paintings, video works and installations by Yeo Shih Yun whose practice is associated with Chinese ink, a medium with its own unique history. Yeo's varied experimentation situates the medium in the fold of contemporary practice. In her works of art, the element of chance – markings rendered by brushes tied to tree branches or battery-operated toy robots – is introduced and eventually transferred and recomposed on a final surface through the use of silkscreens or other print techniques.

NUS Baba House

157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883

Tel: 6227 5731

www.babahouse.nus.edu.sg

English heritage tours: Tues - Fri, 10:00 am; Mandarin Heritage

Tour: First Monday of each month, 10am;

Self-Guided Visits: Every Sat, 1.30pm/2.15pm/3.15pm/4.00pm

To register, please visit babahouse.nus.edu.sg/visit/plan-your-visit

For enquiries, please email babahouse@nus.edu.sg

Now conceived as a heritage house facilitating research, appreciation and reflection of Straits Chinese history and culture, the NUS Baba House was built around 1895 and was once the ancestral home of a Peranakan Chinese family. During the one-hour tour, guests will be introduced to the history and architectural features of the house, and experience visiting a Straits Chinese family home in a 1920s setting, furnished with heirlooms from its previous owners and other donors.

The Peranakan Museum

39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941

Tel: 6332 7591

www.peranakanmuseum.sg

Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am - 7:00 pm

Fri 10:00 am - 9:00 pm

FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am and 2:00 pm (English), Tues to Fri 10:30 am

(Japanese), every second Wednesday of the month 10:45 am

(French).

This intimate museum possesses one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Peranakan objects. Galleries on three floors illustrate the cultural traditions and the distinctive visual arts of the Peranakans.

Amek Gambar: Peranakans and Photography (through February 2019)

The Peranakan Museum's first historical photography exhibition traces the history and evolution of photography in the region, with a focus on how the Peranakan community captured and projected themselves to the world through the multi-faceted medium of photographs.



Singapore Art Museum

71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555

Tel: 6332 3222

www.singaporeartmuseum.sg



Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, Fri 10:00 am – 9:00 pm

The Singapore Art Museum focuses on international contemporary art practices, specialising in Singapore and Southeast Asia. The main building of the Singapore Art Museum (located along 71 Bras Basah Road) is currently closed to prepare it for its next phase of development. Museum exhibitions and programmes continue to take place at SAM at 8Q, the annexe building located at 8 Queen Street, Singapore 188535.

President's Young Talents 2018

(through 27 January 2019)

The *President's Young Talents* is Singapore's premier and only mentoring, commissioning and award programme, which recognises promising artists aged 35 and below, whose practices chart new dimensions in Singapore contemporary art.

STPI

41 Robertson Quay, Singapore 238236

Tel: 6336 3663

www.stpi.com.sg



Opening hours:

Mon to Fri: 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, Sat:

9:00 am – 6:00 pm

Closed Sundays & Public Holidays

FOM guided tours: Thurs 11:30 am, Sat 2:00 pm

Please refer to STPI's website at www.stpi.com.sg for STPI's public programmes and Japanese, Mandarin and special evening tours.

Aaron Curry: Fragments from a Collective Unity

(through 17 November)

STPI Gallery proudly presents the first major solo exhibition in Southeast Asia by LA-based painter and sculptor Aaron Curry. From his suspended *Grid-Trip Cluster* paper sculptures to the free-standing *Ghost Bone* series, Curry transforms the gallery into a starburst of fluorescent patterns and constellations which transport visitors into the 'lost realm' between the two- and three- dimensional. Characterised by saturated neon colours and evocative organic shapes, the biomorphic sculptural works, inspired by a myriad of art movements such as cubism and surrealism, are effortless drawings in space.

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874

Tel: 6256 7377

www.wanqingyuan.org.sg



Opening hours:

Tues to Sun 10:00 am - 5:00 pm, Closed on Mondays

FOM guided tours: Tues to Fri 2:00 pm (English)

FOM Special exhibition guided tours: 10:30am on Fridays in English

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