

# PASSAGE

Friends of the Museums Singapore

September / October 2020



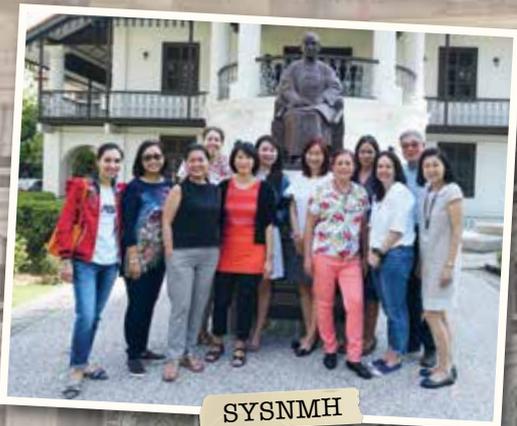
ACM



GB



TPM



SYSNMH



IHC



URA/FOM Heritage Trails



MHC



STPI



NMS



SAM

art  
history  
culture  
people



# President's Letter

**Dear Friends,**

After many months, FOM docents are excited about and ready to resume guiding in the recently reopened museums and heritage institutions. This is especially true of our newly minted docents who, after conducting their mentor tours via Zoom, can now finally be in the museums. Guiding is scheduled to resume from 24 August with one tour a day. This may change depending upon the situation closer to the date.

With travel restrictions in place, visiting museums, art and heritage spaces and trails is an excellent opportunity to discover Singapore. If you decide to join us for a tour, arrive early to go through temperature screening, safe entry registration and safety briefings. The size of each group will be limited to five visitors to a docent. Wearing of a mask is mandatory for all. A face shield may be worn in addition to a mask for added protection. Do remember to "check out" when leaving the museum.

In our continued efforts to keep FOM members engaged, we are launching an exciting new online certificate programme *Asian Art & History for Museum Enthusiasts*. This 10-week course will be a taster for members who are interested in our docent training programme, as the lectures will span across various museums and institutions where FOM docents guide. For current docents, it's an opportunity to learn about museums other than the ones they are involved with. For those who are simply interested in learning about Singapore and the region, it is a unique opportunity to improve your knowledge and meet like-minded people virtually. Led by Laura Socha, Charlotte Dawson and Aditi Kaul, this course will run from 2 October until 11 December. Details of the programme were shared at our virtual Public Information Meeting (PIM) on 31 August. Read more about what FOM has to offer and the experiences of our docents in this edition of *PASSAGE* magazine.



When the Asian Film Study Group (AFSG) members met virtually to discuss the movie *Birdshot* in July, Director Mikhail Red accepted AFSG coordinator Neeraja Rao's invitation to join the meeting. For more than an hour, Mikhail answered questions and shared his insights about the movie and film-making in general. If this sounds interesting, do join us for our Open Morning to hear more about AFSG and other equally engaging FOM groups.

Our Open Morning will be held on 21 September at 10:00 am via Zoom. You will have a chance to hear firsthand from FOM's activity leaders about what they have planned for the coming months from the comfort of your home. Friday with Friends (FWF) is the latest FOM run event to be offered online. Join us once a month on a Friday at 7:00 pm for an engaging hour-long lecture organised jointly with the Asian Civilisations Museum. As with the PIM, the Open Morning and FWF are open to the public. Registration is mandatory for all attendees, members and non-members alike. Do watch out for these and our Monday Morning Lectures which return in September. Visit [www.fom.sg](http://www.fom.sg) to register for all FOM events.

After much deliberation, we have decided to postpone the 2020 FOM docent training to 2021. This is as disappointing for our training teams as it is for those who had signed up for the training. The strict social distancing measures, venue limitations and continuing concerns for the safety of our volunteers, speakers and prospective trainees, were all factors that contributed to this tough decision.

Communications representative Holly Smith is relocating from Singapore. I would like to thank Holly for her service on the council. Gisella Harrold will cover the position for the remainder of the year.

Let us continue to be safe by wearing our face masks, following social distancing measures and adhering to the Ministry of Health guidelines. Stay healthy and stay safe.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Garima". The signature is stylized with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Garima G Lalwani  
FOM President 2020



## PASSAGE

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President's Letter

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**On the Cover:** A collage of the graduation photos of docents from the nine museums FOM docents guide in, including the URA/FOM Heritage Trails docents.

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](http://www.fom.sg) or contact the FOM office.

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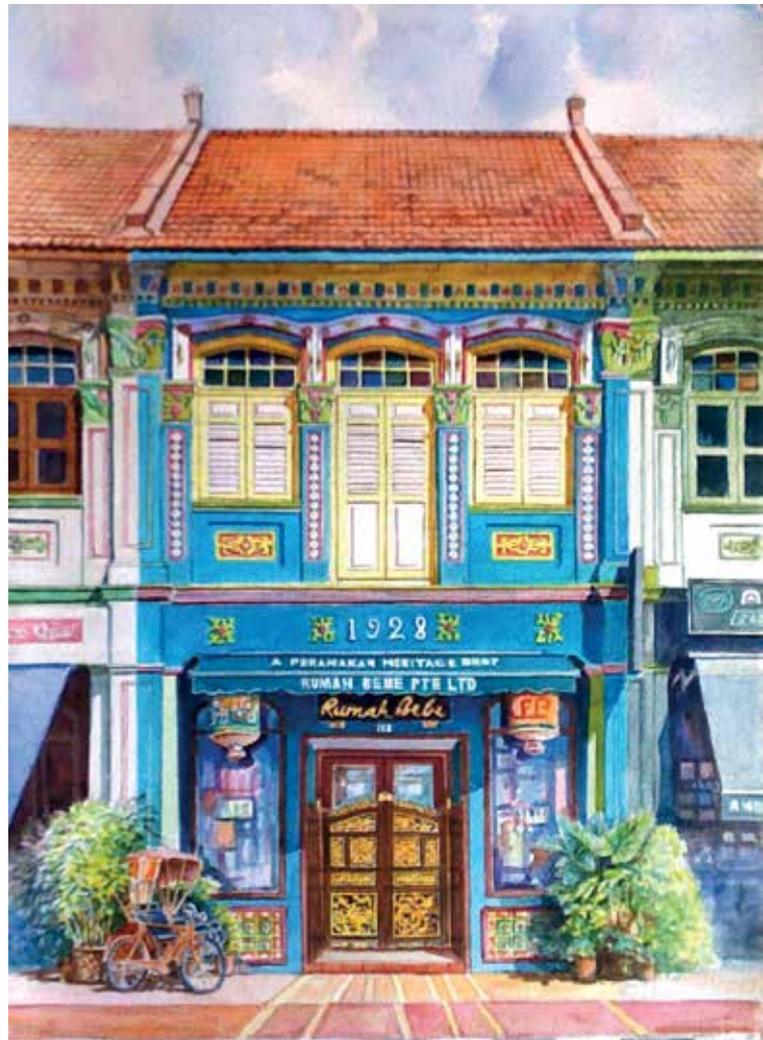
Christine Zeng

Unless otherwise stated, the abbreviation FOM used in this newsletter refers to Friends of the Museums Singapore.

FOM is not responsible for statements expressed in the signed articles and interviews.

# Keeping Traditions and Memories Alive

By Yusoff Abdul Latiff



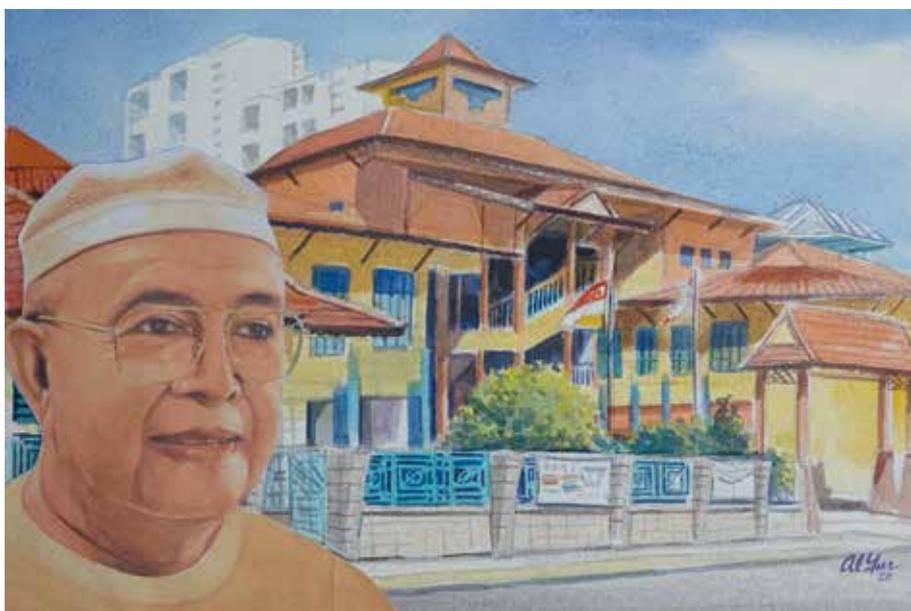
Rumah Bebe, at 113 East Coast Road, is one of Katong's few remaining shophouses, one that keeps the Peranakan heritage alive with its immaculate multi-coloured exterior. The old trishaw on display brings to mind an elderly Nyonya (*bibik*) of the 1950s, resplendent in a *kebaya panjang* with her chignon held tightly in place by a gleaming golden pin (*cucok sanggul*), instructing the trishaw rider to drop her off here. When you open the golden swing door (*pintu pagar*) you will see Bebe Seet busily teaching a small group the art of beading. Tiny colourful glass beads are stitched onto fabric in various floral designs and then crafted into cloth slippers (*kasut manek*) and handbags. She has written a book on Peranakan beading. Although Bebe is not as talkative as most Nyonyas, she is passionate about passing down this and other skills, such as Peranakan cooking. While there, you can ask for a dine-in with Bebe preparing Peranakan dishes such as chicken with *buah keluak* (*ayam buah keluak*), braised pork (*babi pongteh*), mixed herb rice (*nasi ulam*), and round it off with desserts such as a tapioca-based cake (*kueh bingka*) and also take some home. During the COVID-19 lockdown, she started a takeaway service.

Bebe's is an authentic Peranakan house complete with the characteristic furnishing and decorative arts. It is also a mini-museum with showcases displaying Peranakan artefacts including tiffin carriers (*tingkat*), porcelain containers (*kamcheng*) silverware, jewellery, a set of brooches for holding the kebaya closed (*kerosang*), intricately embroidered ready-made kebayas, batik sarongs and Peranakan-themed merchandise, both originals and replicas. Ladies can try on the kebaya, learn the art of donning the batik sarong and have their photos taken. You can also ask Bebe for an in-house tour of this heritage home.



Kampong Lorong Buangkok, the island's last surviving kampong, reminds us of what Singapore was like in the 1950s. The village was founded in 1956 when Sng Teow Koon bought a 1.2 hectare piece of formerly swampy land and rented out small plots for Malay and Chinese families to build houses. It was nicknamed *Kampong Selak Kain* because whenever it flooded the women had to hitch their sarongs up when wading through. Although surrounded by HDB flats, condominiums and private housing, life in the kampong remains slow-paced and quiet, far from the urban bustle. Madam Sng Mui Hong, who inherited the land with her siblings, can be heard in friendly banter with her Malay neighbours, across the hedge that separates their houses.

The original residents' children have moved out but return regularly to be with the old folks, socialise with old friends, cook for a prayer gathering (*kenduri*), make cookies for a home business, or patch up the leaking roofs and dirt track. You still see the kampong spirit of camaraderie and mutual help (*gotong royong*) in action, something that the government and community leaders want to revive in the HDB heartlands. Photographers, artists, nature and nostalgia lovers, and children on learning journeys stream into the kampong at weekends to see what life is like in this living museum.



A former colleague of mine, Cikgu Haji Ariff Zahari, BBM, (the *Bintang Bakti Masyarakat* award, for special service to Singapore), is well-known for his skills in the art of making and playing *gasing*, a traditional Malay spinning top. He even has a turning machine that can precision-craft the Kelantan *gasing*, which weighs about four kilograms and can spin for about an hour. His mini Kelantan *gasing* have been chosen as mementos for visiting dignitaries and in the past, he was chosen to be the craft ambassador during the Singapore Tourism Board's overseas promotion tours. Underlying his love for *gasing* is his deeper and more passionate interest in Malay arts, crafts and traditions. As you enter the lobby of Kampong Ubi Community Centre, a traditional wooden boat (*sampan*) welcomes you to the mini-museum he founded. He curates and displays an impressive collection of Malay craftwork and artefacts, some of which are now loaned to the Heritage Gallery of Wisma Geylang Serai. He used to have a demonstration workshop and conducted tours in the museum before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived.

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**Yusoff Abdul Latiff** is a retired teacher who now indulges in painting watercolours with a focus on intricate Peranakan houses, colourful landscapes and detailed portraits.

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# Communing with the Gods

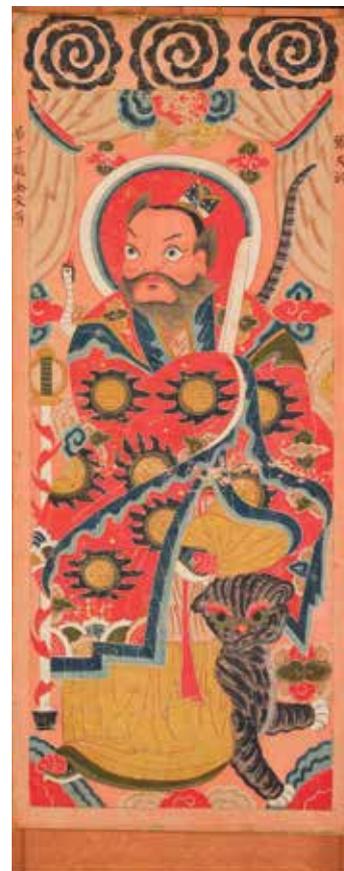
## Iu Mien Ceremonial Paintings

By Uta Weigelt

Three colourful ceremonial paintings (*mien fang*) dating to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen in the Ancestors and Rituals Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). They are from Thailand's Iu Mien ethnic minority, a branch of the Yao ethnic group who during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) migrated from southern China to present-day north Vietnam, Laos and north Thailand. They practise a mix of southern Chinese Daoism, animism and ancestor worship. The ceremonial paintings are essential paraphernalia for their community's various ceremonies and rituals such as initiations and ordinations, ancestor worship, births, weddings and funerals, as well as healing rituals and exorcism. The Iu Mien believe that their deities reside in these paintings and that they can commune with the deities via the images.

Every Iu Mien Yao shaman owns a certain number of paintings according to his rank and the rituals he is allowed to perform. A set of paintings usually consists of 17 vertical scrolls and a long horizontal scroll depicting the "dragon bridge", the bridge connecting this world with the supernatural worlds. This set can be extended up to 24 pieces. The paintings depict the Iu Mien pantheon headed by the Three Pure Ones (also called Celestial Worthies), lesser deities, the mythical ancestor of the Iu Mien Pan Hu, nature divinities, various warrior gods, the Ten Lords of Hell, as well as the tribe's ancestors. Those depicted can be identified by their weapons, entourage, vehicles, divine animals such as tigers, dragons, lion-dogs, and sometimes simply by the name added to the painting in Chinese characters. During ceremonies and rites the paintings are displayed next to the ancestral altar. When not in use, they are carefully rolled up, wrapped in cloths and stored in baskets near the altar.

Shamans commission the images from itinerant painters either as a set or individually, to replace a damaged painting. In the event a painting needs to be replaced, shamans ask the deities to depart from the scroll. Only the artist and his customer may enter the sacred space where the paintings are created, usually a room that has been ritually cleaned and lined with white cotton. With the Iu Mien it is customary to make copies of existing images. A piece of thin paper



Yangjian shuifuguan, *the Governors of This World and The Waters* (left); Daode Tianzun, *the oldest of the Three Pure Ones, represents Laozi* (middle); Zhang Tianshi or *Celestial Master Zhang, the founder of one school of Daoism* (right).

is placed on an existing painting and the outlines of the figures, animals and objects, the so-called "bones", are drawn. Next is the "meat" – the skin, mouth and hair – and lastly the costumes and decorative elements are coloured. Traditionally, the artists use mineral paints and mix them with glue made from animal bone. In order to make the red parts of the picture more radiant, an additional layer of glue is applied. Finally, the painter "opens the eyes" of all the deities depicted in the painting using a rooster's blood. However, the image is not yet consecrated. The shaman has to present it to the gods in special ceremonies and invite the deities to enter. Only then can the scrolls be used in religious practices. The whole process of producing the paintings and finally communing with the deities through them in religious ceremonies, can take up to three years.

Along with other sacred items of the Iu Mien at the ACM (musical instruments, divination blocks, stamps and a shaman's scripture) these scrolls serve as a vivid record of Iu Mien beliefs.

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**Uta Weigelt** is a docent at the ACM and TPM. Her interests lie in Chinese and Myanmar arts and crafts.

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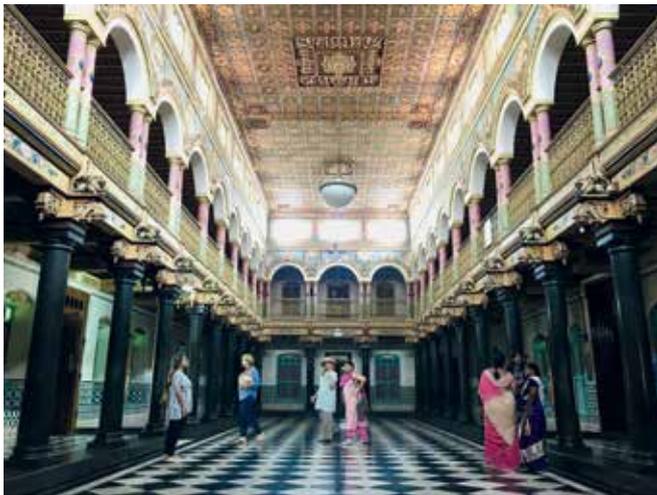
*Photos collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board*

# The Chettiar Mansions in Tamil Nadu

## When Buildings Form a Museum

By Patti Neves

The Chettinad region in Tamil Nadu, India, is full of privately owned architectural relics in various states of decaying opulence. The region is home to the Chettiars, a caste also known as Nattukottai, meaning people with palatial houses in the countryside, and includes 73 villages spread over 1,550 square kilometres in the Sivagangai and Pudukottai districts. They are all composed of huge mansions, some with 60 rooms. A good place to appreciate them is Kanadukathan, a village close to Karaikudi. Today, 11 Chettinad villages are on UNESCO's tentative list.



The grand interior of a Chettiar mansion

The origins of the Chettiars are mysterious and historical records are rare. Some are believed to have originated from the ancient kingdom of Chola, between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. They thrived during colonialist expansion, initially as local merchants and traders of precious stones and later as bankers and moneylenders. Their role in finance expanded with the growth of British colonial rule in Southeast Asia when many Chettiars emigrated from India to Ceylon, Burma and Malaya (now Malaysia and Singapore). In Singapore, they were considered major players in the banking and finance sectors and established businesses in the Singapore River area, close to the trading houses and government offices. Their economic power peaked in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when villages in Chettinad flourished.

Initially, these villages were organised around major temples. These were clan centres, where the Chettiars' main social and cultural activities developed. The outstanding urban and rural planning around the temples created unique town plans, with thousands of palatial houses and an innovative system of rainwater harvesting and storage. They also excelled in their adaptation of materials for use in the semi-arid and hot climate. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these mansions is how they were adapted to the community's life-cycle rituals (from birth to death). Pavilions, halls and courtyards were added for business purposes, but also sumptuous areas for receptions and weddings.

The eclectic architecture of these mansions was described by *The New York Times* as a "trippy Walt Disney World of styles". In the same neighbourhood, one can observe Raj-

inflected Victorian influences next to Georgian Palladian styles with hints of Tudor, and down the same street, Art Deco confections straight out of Miami's South Beach.

As the Chettiars were a globe-trotting merchant and banking clan, the architecture of their houses reflected the multitude of western and Asian cultures that they were exposed to during their travels. Their monumental façades, their height, the multiple levels of balustrades and the use of many architectural elements such as colonnades and porticos, are typical characteristics.

Every aspect of Chettiar mansions was conceived to display the wealth of the owner. Teak wood was imported from Burma, satinwood from Ceylon, marble from Italy and Belgium, cast iron and steel from the UK, tiles from Japan, Germany, France and England. Many chandeliers were brought from Belgium, France and Italy.

They also combined the best craftsmanship from different regions of India, including woodcarving, frescoes and egg-plastering. Chettinad plaster was made by carefully mixing eggs with seashell lime. At least five layers were applied to cool down the interiors and get a smooth finish. One of the most magnificent elements of Chettiar homes is the front and central wooden doorways' carved frames. A stunning example can be appreciated today at the Indian Heritage Centre in Singapore.



Ornate corner section of a mansion



Beautiful tiles frame the doorway

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**Patti Neves** is an ACM docent, a travel enthusiast and blogger at *the Tripping Unicorn*. ([www.trippingunicorn.com](http://www.trippingunicorn.com)).

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*The photos were taken by the author during the FOM trip to the Coromandel Coast in February 2019.*

# FOM Docents at the ACM in the Age of Corona

By Jo Wright

*(The first part of this article was written in April 2020)*

Last year FOM docents at ACM researched three special exhibitions, guided a total of over 22,000 visitors and conducted almost 2,500 tours, busy times for everyone. What are these docents doing now, in this Age of Corona, with museums shuttering at the start of April, special exhibitions on hold, the new norms of social distancing and working from home in effect? Read on to find out...



Anne Perng receiving her Certificate of Guiding from Jo Wright, photo by Valerie Guichard

“After hearing about the imminent lockdown at the end of March, and as others rushed to re-stock their fridges, I rushed to the ACM. My first thoughts were not, ‘did we have enough loo-roll?’ but, ‘I must see the new Materials and Design galleries on the third floor before the museum shuts.’ While following all the safe-distancing protocols, I entered the galleries for the first time and was delighted to see them virtually empty. I quickly whipped out my phone and took several short videos of each room. Little did I realise how useful this would be. Soon I was editing these (very shaky and sketchy) shots together to create a brief video



A view of the new Fashion Gallery



A view of the newly-revamped Ceramics Gallery

to give other ACM docents a quick sneaky peek at these fabulous spaces. My film-making ‘world’ premiere was at the inaugural Zoom ACM docent town hall with almost 70 docents logged in, where I provided a live and rather rushed voice-over, which is not as easy as you would think. I am still awaiting my Oscar nomination.” – Laura Socha

“And then it happened. Digital networks became the virtual Silk Roads that the ACM’s docents and trainees ‘Zoom’ed across to innovate, exchange ideas and keep the passion for our collection alive. On a single screen, from east to west, right to left, and up and down, we – an assortment of nationalities, all literally at home in Singapore – wonderfully reflected the cross-cultural concepts that are embedded both in this region and the ACM. How can you not love that and know that everything will be fine? It remains a privilege to live in Singapore with its world-class connectivity that allows me to remain connected to my new community of trainees, docents and friends.” – Heike Bredenkamp



Another view of the Fashion Gallery

“With the prospect of the museum closing its doors but glittering new galleries being opened up a scant three days before lockdown, like Laura, I raced to the ACM to grab some photos. Whilst I was there, (from a socially safe distance) I bumped into Kennie Ting, ACM’s director, and he told me how excited he was with these new galleries. Sure enough, they looked absolutely stunning and I spent a very happy few hours trying to photograph as much of them as possible. We are now actively researching these galleries and will be sharing the findings with the rest of the ACM docent



Jolie Davis celebrating a significant birthday at the Privé, ACM

cohort in a series of virtual ‘soapboxes’ – in effect, online guided tours. I think it’s true to say that docents are happiest when meeting up, researching and guiding. Always more fun to do that in person, but it’s surprising how much of that we can do at home from the end of a computer.” – Jo Wright

“A few docents were discussing ways to bring a bit of fun and healthy competition into our first-ever town hall meeting. My daughter, who had been listening to our call, volunteered to make her favourite online quiz game, with specially tailored questions about the ACM collection. Of course her little brother and sister were not going to be left



Susanne Geerdink, Jolie Davis, Laura Socha and Jo Wright at a birthday celebration

out – so it quickly became a family affair. They rolled their eyes and giggled as they explained everything from how to play the quiz online through to how to actually create one to their technically challenged mother. But in return I got a chance to discuss a few quiz topics such as the importance of betel nut sets and the origin of mother-of-pearl with them. As I never fully trust technology, we tested the quiz again and again and now we all know how many wheels are on Surya the sun god’s chariot and just what or who Cornelius Pronk was. One of the things I enjoy most about



Simone Lee celebrates completing the first on-line DOT. Photo by Enrique Lee

being an FOM docent is the opportunity to share my love of museums and the ACM collection with my children. And I know they relished the opportunity to show me just how skilled they are with technology I know nothing about. We are all ready to get to work on the next quiz and keep learning.” – Jolie Davies

“The Docent Ongoing Training (DOT) session I presented last week was scheduled a long time ago, when we had no idea COVID-19 existed and life as we knew it would be so dramatically changed by it. When I learned we were going online for everything, my first impulse was to postpone it. But I soon realised that besides keeping me busy and motivated, I could learn a new skill. At the beginning of the presentation I was nervous. I’m glad we have such a great docent community; they were very supportive. By the time I was wrapping up, I was really enjoying this new format. We made FOM history that day, me as a presenter, our DOT coordinators and the 45 docents who participated in our first ever ACM Zoom DOT.” – Simone Lee

#### Update, August 2020

Mentor tours went virtual with the new docents conducting their first tours online, handling the presentations and interactions with their virtual visitors like seasoned professionals. We discovered the benefit of conducting tours online: being able to share the experience with friends and family living overseas, as well as being able to zoom in on the smallest details of objects without bumping heads on glass cabinets. No problems about social distancing from the safety of a computer screen at home.

Lockdown was lifted and the museums re-opened, albeit with stringent protocols in place. What did the docents do then? The answer is that they flocked (separately) to the museums to gaze at the galleries they had so badly missed, inhaling the artefacts (from behind their masks of course) and greeting them as old friends almost from another era. Zoom meetings and get-togethers have continued apace – the easiest way to fit so many people into a single ‘room’ but with the easing of restrictions, small groups of docents have been thrilled to meet up in person, to discuss artefacts, new galleries and projects.

Most excitingly of all, docents have been re-discovering the joy of popping into the ACM’s Privé for the traditional post-museum get-togethers and discussions. Some of us have even been popping bottles of bubbly at Privé to celebrate friendships, farewells and significant birthdays – events that in theory can be done online, but like so many things, are SO much better in real life.

*Photos by the author unless otherwise noted*

# Asian Art and History for Museum Enthusiasts

By Charlotte Dawson

2020 has been a year for the history books. I imagine all of us have had to rethink plans and adapt to the circumstances that COVID-19 has presented to us. One unfortunate outcome is that very recently the FOM council made the difficult decision to cancel the docent training programmes that were prepared for the 2020-21 period.

However, we are a resilient and hopeful lot. I would hazard a guess that before 2020 most of us had not heard of the video conferencing website Zoom and now we use it as a verb. In the spirit of adapting, several of our FOM activities have shifted to Zoom and our members embraced it. Monday Morning Lectures became Monday Morning Lockdown Lectures. These gave way to the Study Tours team presenting our FOM community with the Armchair Travels series. We may not yet be able to meet in person to explore Singapore or enjoy a shared passion for food through Curio, but we have learned how to remain relevant and stay connected.



The FOM Overall Co-Heads of Training and Museum Representatives team is thrilled to announce a brand new and unique opportunity. We may not yet be able to go to the museums to enjoy a tour together, but we can still visit them virtually through *Asian Art & History for Museum Enthusiasts*. This programme is “All About ME” or rather YOU as a Museum Enthusiast (ME) who is simply curious about our FOM-affiliated museums, heritage institutions and heritage trails.

Do you like to visit museums but have not had the time to get to all 11 that are affiliated with FOM? Have you ever wondered what each of them has to offer? Two are temporarily closed for refurbishment, so visiting is not even possible – until now. *Asian Art & History for Museum Enthusiasts* is a chance to step into that museum digitally. Maybe you enjoy museums but what really sparks your interest is a good lecture series. Whatever the case, we are all “friends of the museums”.

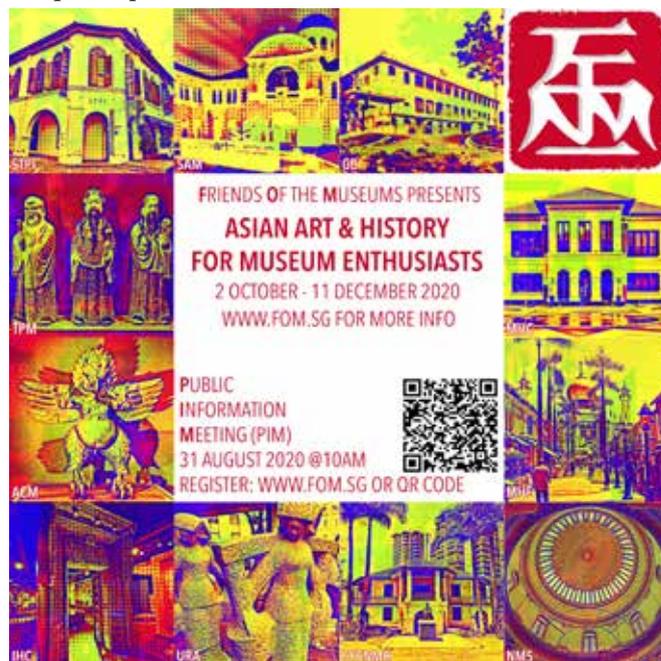
*Asian Art & History for Museum Enthusiasts* is a 10-week long online workshop available only to FOM members and will give a sneak peek into the museums through the eyes of FOM docents from the comfort of your own home. It is the first of its kind and all our affiliated museums, heritage institutions and heritage trails will participate.

Each week highlights a different institution. FOM docents will present two lectures and give a virtual tour as well as

lead smaller group discussions through Zoom breakout rooms. If you sign up for this workshop, you can expect to be engaged by our museum docents on Tuesday and Friday mornings (9:30 am to 12:00 pm) from 2 October through 11 December.

*Asian Art & History for Museum*

*Enthusiasts* is only \$50 and includes wonderful learning opportunities and insights plus a once-in-a-lifetime priority perk in the application and interview process for anyone interested in applying for docent training in 2021/22. All our MEs will earn a Certificate of Completion for attending the lectures and virtual tours. This could be a unique keepsake for the “Year of Covid”.



An online Public Information Meeting (PIM) is scheduled for 31 August to outline the details of *Asian Art & History for Museum Enthusiasts*. You will meet the various teams who are working to ensure this workshop is one for the ages. Please watch our website ([www.fom.sg](http://www.fom.sg)) for updates, the registration link for the PIM, and the registration link to join *Asian Art & History for Museum Enthusiasts*.

Charlotte Dawson, Aditi Kaul and Laura Socha are the team preparing *Asian Art & History for Museum Enthusiasts* for the FOM community.

All artwork by Charlotte Dawson

## Docents Conduct Virtual Tours during the ACM's Closure

By Jane Hirons

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) docent training programme of 2019/2020 initially resembled many of the other training sessions that have taken place over the years. However, as we all know, 2020's COVID-19 crisis disrupted many plans in countless ways and the docent training programme was no exception. By the time docent trainees were preparing their last gallery paper and tour of the Ancestors and Rituals Gallery, the ACM was officially closed, but this did not mean that our training was suspended. Luckily, an amazing team of experienced docents and mentors guided us through the final steps of our training using Zoom. The joy and excitement of being able to officially join the ACM docent community was celebrated by all, but we were also very aware that it would probably be a significant period of time before we could physically guide visitors around the ACM. Some of us worried that our skills would get rusty, but some newly minted docents decided to find an alternative way to reach people who want to know more about the ACM's treasures.

Ulrika Mortimer-Schutts began guiding friends, family and even her daughter's classmates using Zoom during the Circuit Breaker period. Although Ulrika noted that Zoom is somewhat less interactive and personal, she thought the advantages were plentiful and noted that new guides might find the platform less intimidating as notes could be glanced at when needed and various visual aids could be used. Ulrika also mentioned that it was a wonderful opportunity to guide people overseas and allow those who may have felt cooped up because of the Circuit Breaker, to "travel in their minds".

Another new docent, Jo Groarke, was also busy during the Circuit Breaker giving virtual tours to friends and family. Although she enjoys virtual guiding, she notes that, "Nothing can replace the awe-



The Asian Civilisations Museum, photo by the author



Ulrika guiding friends and family via Zoom



New guide Lia Santis (second row, third from left) and her Columbian friends. Photo by Lia Santis

inspiring sensation you feel standing in front of a 2,000-year-old artefact and hearing fabulous stories about it." Jo initially guided the Tang Shipwreck Gallery and the Trade Gallery but mentioned that her repertoire eventually expanded to include the Ancestors and Rituals Gallery and Ancient Religions Gallery.

Lia Santis, another newly graduated docent, described her first virtual tours as, "a cultural experience for our times" and an innovative solution to the museum being closed. Lia also mentioned that although it was difficult to gauge the interest level of the virtual visitors, it was also great to be free of the constraints of physical space when organising the sequence of artefacts. Lia's virtual tours focused on the Tang Shipwreck Gallery, one of her favourite galleries. Like Ulrika and Jo, Lia guided friends who were curious to see what exactly she had learned at the ACM during the previous months.

It's safe to say that the new docents approached online guiding with enthusiasm and energy, but all agree that nothing can replace face-to-face guiding. Now that the museum is open again, many of the new docents have eagerly gone back to visit much-loved artefacts and the new Fashion and Textiles, Ceramics and Jewellery Galleries. Although online guiding has many benefits, I'll leave you with a quote by Jo that sums up many of our feelings: "There is nothing more enjoyable than stories shared and laughter over coffee at Privé with fellow docents. The camaraderie that can only truly be found face-to-face with docents and visitors."



New guide and incoming co-head of docent training Jo Groarke (top) guiding the Ancient Religions Gallery. Photo by Jo Groarke.

# Reminiscing About Gillman Barracks

## Special Moments in our Docent Journey

By Yvonne Sim

Gillman Barracks (GB) has a rich past. In 1936, a swampy jungle was transformed into a British military barracks. When the British withdrew in 1971, the property was sold to the Singapore government for the princely sum of \$1. The Singapore Armed Forces occupied the site until it was converted into a lifestyle and retail hub in 1996 and renamed Gillman Village. In 2012, after being re-modelled into an arts cluster of private art galleries featuring local and international works, GB reclaimed its name. It is also home to the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (CCA), a Nanyang Technological University research centre that offers residencies and exhibits selected works.

Two groups of FOM docents guide at GB on Saturday afternoons; one guides the Art and History Tour and the other the History and Heritage Tour. Some of our seasoned 'trouper' share what warms their hearts from their interactions with visitors.



Docents past and present. Photo courtesy of Rosalie Kwok

"Gillman Barracks is a gem. In the last six years, I have not grown tired of guiding here because of its unique history, diverse art galleries and the CCA. One memorable moment was during a tour with a visitor whose father was posted here with the British army. Hearing hers and her family's memories of spending time at the barracks was fascinating. Her enthusiasm for GB's conservation and transformation into an arts hub was obvious; she took many photos to share with her dad" – Dorit Shavit, *Art and History docent*

"Last September, I was surprised when two tourists joined the tour, unusual for GB. The lady's father had spent two years here in the early 1950s and always spoke fondly about his time in Singapore. She related this tale. Whenever soldiers were sent back to the UK, the remaining ones gathered on top of the hillside accommodations buildings and waved goodbye with their bedsheets as the ship passed



First you see this. WUD YA DO IT, by Yeo Kaa, photo courtesy of Magdalene Ho

Pasir Panjang's shores (before land was reclaimed in the area and the accommodation buildings torn down in the 1970s) – Stephanie Khaou, *History and Heritage docent*.



Then you do a double-take. WUD YA DO IT, by Yeo Kaa, photo courtesy of Alka Kapoor

"My most memorable tour was guiding a jovial man in the fourth stage of throat cancer and his wife. He had done his national service at GB decades ago and wanted to see how it had changed after all these years. He recounted interesting anecdotes of those years, such as building a Bailey bridge. He enjoyed visiting the art galleries. I hope that he recovered from his illness." – Magdalene Ho, *Art and History docent*

"A Singapore Armed Forces guy on one of my tours told me that they used to crawl to their rooms, especially when trying to sneak in a lady friend. Their commanding officer's office was in Block 6. He could see what was going on from the third floor of Block 9 when he stood outside his office, but not if they were crawling on all fours." – Alka Kapoor, *Art and History docent*

"There are always surprises when guiding art tours. During a 2019 student tour of the *SEA Focus* exhibition, my confidence was strained when the artwork I planned to talk about had been reduced to smashed pieces with paint splashed all over the exhibition booth during a live performance. I decided to give it a pass and pick another artwork and had taken a few steps before realising that the students were not following me; they were all peering into the mess and whispering happily to each other...I made a U-turn, of course." – Lim Yuen Ping, *Art and History docent*

My 'aha' moment happened at the same *SEA Focus* exhibition, also during a student tour. After the tour, one student thanked me and said, "I never knew contemporary art could be so interesting. I want to learn more." – Yvonne Sim, *Art and History docent*

As the saying goes, "Absence makes the (he)art grow fonder". We can't wait for the green light to get back to guiding when the galleries reopen to the public.

# Finding My Feet as an IHC Docent

By Vasanthi Ravi

When an opportunity to talk about history, culture and heritage came up, I decided to put my public speaking lessons into action. Unaware of the trials and tribulations that were to follow, the hours of study and research, I arrived at the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) building filled with childlike curiosity and a zeal to learn more.

Our training started in September 2015 and we were the first batch to graduate after the opening of the centre in May. Our coordinator and training head, Vidhya Nair, had encouraged some of us to work on bilingual tours, in English and Tamil. This was the first of its kind as there had not been any Tamil tours at any of the museums before. It has been less than a year since the opening of the IHC, and we have been working towards increasing the number of visitors to our galleries.

It was a warm and bright day, 3 March 2016, when as an enthusiastic volunteer, I was waiting for a group of junior college students, the group that I would be taking on my debut tour. The students had been participants in a workshop held in conjunction with the Singapore Writers' Festival. Their task was to practise scriptwriting with senior Tamil writers and so they visited the galleries to learn more about the history of Indians in Singapore. They particularly wanted to learn more about the personalities whose lives were covered in their books and materials.

After many practice sessions, I was all set, raring to go. However, when the moment came, some surprises created special challenges for me. The first was seeing the personalities about whom I was going to be talking, participating in the group I was guiding. Secondly, the presence of several famous Tamil television personalities raised expectations to a higher level. Another challenge was the timing of the tour, which was sandwiched between their workshop sessions.



The author at a student guiding workshop, photo courtesy of the IHC Outreach Team



A signboard in Gallery 5, Making of the Nation, photo by the author

Initially the students were shy, so I had to put in a lot of effort to get them to be interactive and immerse themselves in the experience. Thankfully, I succeeded in breaking the ice and posed a few questions in order to engage them. It ended with a proud moment for me. Two of the famous writers featured in the galleries acknowledged my efforts to run the tour in Tamil. They felt that it had added value to those who had participated in the workshop. When it came to later Tamil language events, this debut Tamil-language tour offered me many opportunities at different levels. The latest was to be a contributor to *Singapore Tamils 200*, a bicentennial launch that features 200 Indian pioneers.

Constant learning and reading are the most crucial requirements demanded of a docent. To continuously update one's knowledge is the only way to stay ahead of the curve and do one's best. To do my best, I try to approach every group as if they were part of my debut tour. It helps me stay fresh and put my best foot forward, tour after tour. Every interaction with new visitors not only allows them to learn from the tour, but also allows me to gain valuable insights into their perspectives. They walk in with their own ideas about the exhibits and it always proves interesting to see what they had in mind before actually taking part in the tour.

The pandemic has been the greatest obstacle we have seen yet, to say the least. When everything reopens, I feel that giving a tour will be akin to giving my first tour all over again, seeing as it has been so long. However, rather than let that bog me down, I hope to take it in stride and use it to my advantage in the hope that I will be able to bring with me the same enthusiasm that I did all those years ago.

# Making History Come Alive

By Clare Hennah

When I moved here three years ago, I knew no one, but was craving adventure, culture and the chance to learn more about Asia. Naturally, I began educating myself by taking free museum tours with experienced guides. They were brilliant, making the history come alive and as it turned out, many of them were expats just like me.

In those early days, my favourite museum was the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC), a glorious palace set in beautiful grounds located in the vibrant Kampong Glam area. The stories of early settlers, sultans, Malay pioneers, writers, musicians and film stars really captured my imagination and I was hooked.

So I embarked on the MHC docent training programme. After intensive training with a wide range of people including professors, Malay dancers, collectors, enthusiasts, and with a lot of support from my fellow trainees, my wonderful group leader Sadiyah Shahal and my amazing mentor, Millie Phuah, I graduated as a docent in 2019 and began taking groups of people around myself.

For my first tour, a friend kindly offered to bring a couple of people to ensure that I had an audience on whom to practise my new skills. Little did I know that in addition to those three people, another 12 would join the tour and I



Kueh moulds and chendol maker. Photo courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre



A pending, circa 19<sup>th</sup> century, Malay Heritage Centre Collection

would have a group of 15. And it was great. They were from all nationalities, ages and walks of life. They were fascinated by the stories I told, particularly by all the anecdotes and asides that I was able to add in. The more they listened, the more they joined in, the more they smiled, the more they laughed and by the end we all felt quite bonded. In fact, when I ended the tour with the story of Zubir Said, the Malay composer of *Majulah Singapura*, Singapore's national anthem, one man even sang it for us. How lovely to have people so deeply invested in my tour.

As I have continued to guide, I have naturally discovered the artefacts that I enjoy talking about the most and the ones that the visitors respond to the best. One of my favourites is the *pending* (the sultan's belt buckles), part of the royal regalia. Made in gold with precious and semi-precious stones, they are easy to imagine worn by the ruler, representing his status, his confidence and his wisdom. They really help to make the early history of the palace come alive.

Other favourites are more mundane items, utensils from a Malay kitchen. The *kueh* (cake) mould, the *chendol* (an iced dessert) maker and the coconut grinder are all early examples but are still so relevant to life today and of course provide the perfect opportunity to encourage visitors to try all the culinary delights of the area

And lastly of course, there is Zubir Said who ran away from his Minangkabau family at an early age to pursue his true passion

for music. Largely self-taught, he wrote countless songs for Malay movies and is best known as the composer of the national anthem. Not only am I able to show visitors the actual piano he wrote it at, but also the original score with his handwritten changes. It is so inspiring. Well it must be if it makes visitors sing.

So from arriving in Singapore hoping to learn something of the culture, here I am today helping to make history come alive for my visitors and who knows ... maybe some of them will embark on the docent journey just like me.



Original score of Majulah Singapura, on display at the Malay Heritage Centre, republished with permission from the Family of Zubir Said

## A Passion for History and the National Museum of Singapore

By Lam Min-Yee

While growing up in Singapore, I took a keen interest in its growth and development. Regaled by family narratives about the lives of my forefathers whose arrival here mirrored those of many other immigrants from China in the early 1900s, my interest in Singapore's history and heritage was piqued at an early age. Many family weekends were spent at museums since my family supported events related to heritage, culture and the arts.



Examples of the low-skill, labour-intensive industries of the early 1960s

Graduating as an SG50 FOM docent at NMS was a personal milestone. It is very fulfilling to be a part of a like-minded community and to have access to a world of opportunities. Being a Singaporean docent allows me to tell the Singapore story from a local perspective – my personal contribution to my homeland. In today's fast-paced world, there is still much to be done to raise public awareness of heritage and history so that we can all learn and benefit from the lessons of the past.

My maiden docent tour remains my most memorable experience. When I graduated after many months of rigorous study and training, nothing could have prepared me for leading 39 visitors in one tour. Much to my surprise, months later I learned that on that day I had guided the year's largest NMS visitor group. This interactive tour had ended with a larger audience than when it began. In retrospect, challenging as it seemed at the time, I treasure this unforgettable experience because guiding in the post-COVID era will most likely march to a 'new normal,' with smaller groups.

One of my favourite artefacts in the Early Singapore section is the painting *View of Singapore from Mount Wallich*.



Highlighted details of the View of Singapore from Mt Wallich painting

Regarded as one of the most important visual records of the Singapore settlement of the mid-1800s, we find ourselves looking at Singapore in

1856 through the eyes of British artist Percy Carpenter. Not only does this artefact feature major landmarks and places of worship that still stand today, we also see the seaside landing point for early immigrants, our forefathers. This marked the 'birthing' of today's plural society and its legacy of ethnic and religious tolerance woven into the fabric of multi-ethnic, multicultural, present-day Singapore.

Another favourite is the Building an Economy section, where I enjoy sharing the story of Singapore's economic transformation from Third World to First. Newly independent in 1965 and with minimal natural resources, achieving full employment within a record 10 years was no easy task. Today, we again face major socio-economic upheavals brought on unexpectedly by the COVID-19 pandemic. To overcome this "crisis of a generation", the mantra from the past emphasising "re-skilling" and "up-skilling" still rings true, as Singaporeans seek to future-proof their careers in the face of global economic uncertainty.



By the 1970s-80s we had leap-frogged to highly skilled, precision technology

Guiding is but one facet of an FOM volunteer's world. There are weekly lectures, new exhibitions, research and training opportunities. This is life-long learning at its best. Since the COVID-19 disruption, the dedicated FOM committee and training team have moved activities to an online platform. Lectures, interest groups and meetings all are within the virtual sphere – truly the acme of what it means to pivot during a pandemic. Docents are an irreplaceable and passionate group and the FOM-organised Monday Morning Lockdown Lectures, Armchair Travels, Docent Ongoing Training and Docents Activity Squad sessions via Zoom, do much more than keep our community connected – they keep our passion and love of history, culture and heritage alive.

I very much look forward to guiding again when docent-led tours resume. With regulated capacity and limitations on group numbers, guiding as we know it will undoubtedly change. Perhaps change is good. Perhaps visitors will have more time to pause, appreciate and uncover that special story behind each artefact.

Photos courtesy of the author

## The Peranakan Museum

# My Most Memorable Guiding Experience at TPM

By Belinda Boey

Like most museums in Singapore, the Peranakan Museum has a programme dedicated to guiding students. Guiding a group of 10-year-olds from Dulwich College Singapore last year made me feel invigorated. It is customary to fill up a log after each guided tour for record purposes and each one has a section on impressions. On that day, without exception, every entry glowed with awe and compliments.

What made that tour so rewarding and heartwarming? We usually divide students into groups of no more than 10 because the museum is compact and the exhibits tend to be small items, which require close scrutiny. Often, we do not encounter uniform enthusiasm among our visitors but in this case, I found the children to be genuinely interested in the exhibits; they participated in discussion and even laughed at my jokes! I felt as if I was having a conversation and not just reading from my script. My fellow docents had the same experience. One docent told her group that in the old days, Peranakan girls were denied an education and were primarily confined to the home learning to cook and sew. To which one of her students replied that there was an exception; not only was Lee Choo Neo educated but went on to practise as a doctor. I later learned that before the visit to the museum, the students had been introduced to the Peranakans. They had exposure to the history, the culture, the cuisine and some prominent Peranakan personalities. The visit to the museum was the culmination and the actualisation of their learning. All too often, I have experienced guiding students who have no idea why they are going to a museum, to be shown a series of exhibits which they have no affinity for and to be accompanied by indifferent chaperones who are more intent on building a relationship with their mobile phones.



Portrait of Lee Choo Neo

When we visited the section of the museum on religion, we explored the different waves of influences. When the Chinese immigrants first arrived in Singapore, they brought with them beliefs in Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, folklore and myths. In the old days, they would have arrived in sailboats. Upon arrival, to thank the goddess of the sea for a safe passage, they would worship on the shores. Over time, a temple was built and still stands today. It is known as Thian Hock Keng, at 158 Telok Ayer Street. Only a handful of students knew about this temple, but they were quite determined that they would go with their parents to visit.

The early Chinese immigrants tended to be men, seeking their fortune overseas. As these men married the local women, their cultures became intermingled. However, in the practice of religion, their descendants, the Peranakans, appear to have cherry-picked from the various forms of



The Thian Hock Keng temple in Telok Ayer Street, photo by Gisella Harrold

inherited beliefs. The next significant influence came about after Singapore was colonised in 1819, a date that the children triumphantly answered correctly when quizzed. Along came Christianity. Among the first were British missionaries who built schools such as the present-day St Margaret Girls' School, St Joseph's Institution, Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus and Methodist Girls' School. Being pragmatic and economically savvy, Peranakan families sent their children to these schools because the medium of instruction was English. The interesting outcome was an additional mix to their eclectic collection of religious beliefs. It was not inconceivable for a Peranakan family to worship at an ancestral altar, a family altar and to go to church on Sundays. The children were initially a little surprised, but they are used to being among a fluid body of students with friends coming and going. They work and play with children from all nationalities and ethnicities. Most importantly, they don't have fixed ideas about beliefs and religions being mutually exclusive. We ended the tour on the reassuring note that if everybody was tolerant and flexible, there would be no wars.



St Joseph's Institution 1962, image courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore, collection of K F Wong

I left the museum that day feeling warm and cozy. The Peranakan Museum is currently closed for a major infrastructure upgrade and will most likely reopen in 2022. I can't wait to see the new and expanded content, which will contain Peranakan culture from Southeast Asia.

## New Discoveries

By Cecilia Maria Arellano

Excitement! That was how I and many others felt when preparing to be docents for the 2016 Singapore Biennale called *An Atlas of Mirrors*, a theme with many interpretations. At the time, I had been in Singapore for only a year and had been exploring and learning about its culture, food, religion, prosperity and people. Moving to Singapore allowed me to experience many new opportunities, such as becoming an FOM docent.

The Biennale's theme invited us to think about ourselves and the way we see the world. An atlas consists of different maps that help us to navigate and understand the boundaries between countries. We also know that history's ruling powers drew the maps according to their own interests and thus helped write their histories. I was eager to learn about the 58 artworks and understand how the artists depicted history, identity, boundaries, borders, memory, time, communities, societies and so much more.

Artists portray a variety of perspectives of historical events such as the colonial era in Southeast Asia. Similar to the colonisation in the Americas, Europeans colonised other countries as well, predominantly for the exploitation of their goods, which were very valuable in Europe at that time. In 1492, when Christopher Columbus arrived in the Bahamas thinking he'd found the East Indies, spices were among the most desirable items, also gold, silver, sugar, timber and cotton.

One of the most sought-after spices was nutmeg. Its price was equivalent to that of gold in Europe and was the subject of a beautiful installation called *History Repeats Itself* by Titarubi, an Indonesian contemporary artist. The piece depicts a chapter from Indonesia's colonial past, driven by the artist's conviction that, "there are things that need to be corrected, there are other things that need to be questioned again, and still there are many more things for which re-questioning had to be delayed for certain reasons."

This stunning installation was the highlight of my tours. As soon as we entered the gallery, visitors smiled and their eyes brightened when they saw its grandiosity. However, when I began explaining its meaning, I would often observe the smiles fading as they listened to the history behind that



*History Repeats Itself*, by Titarubi, image courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum



A tour for Portuguese-speaking ladies in front of Patricia Eustaquio's *The Hunters Enter the Woods*, photo courtesy of the author

artwork. The rich, golden appearance of the robes suggests pomp. The pieces were made of 45,000 gold-plated nutmegs and looked like gilded cages. However, they were hollow, ghostly figures of the past, showing us that richness and power can sometimes be illusory.

The Indonesian burnt boats also caught visitors' attention, a reference to the dark side of colonialism. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Dutch East India Company incinerated stocks of nutmeg to keep prices high and slaughtered indigenous people, burning their boats in order to gain control of the valuable spice islands, thus destroying local maritime power. The exploitation of human and natural resources represented in Titarubi's installation, evoke a dark period of colonial conquests in Southeast Asia. It reminded me of what the Portuguese and Spanish had done during their colonisation of Latin America.

I felt emotional while presenting Do Ho Suh's large sculpture *Gate*. This was embarrassing but I saw empathy in the faces around me. As guides we try to correlate the artist's perspective to real and personal aspects of life, making it more meaningful. This one related to my own experiences and memories. *Gate* is modelled on one from the artist's traditional house in South Korea. It is significant for him because when he moved to New York as a young student, he became homesick and recreating the gate brought him comfort, closer to home. His work is about memory. Using silk, he gave the sculpture a 'ghost' idea with reference to the loss of what had been left behind; the steel made it foldable and portable, allowing him to take it everywhere he travelled. *Gate* related to my personal life as an expat for the past 10 years, far from home and feeling homesick. However, I am very grateful for all the experiences and wonderful people that I've met. And without doubt, being part of the FOM docent programme has enriched my Singapore life.

# Ten Years and Counting

## A Docent's Experience at STPI

By Roopa Dewan

Ken Tyler voiced this dream, "to build a state-of-the-art workshop, paper mill, gallery and educational facility" when I attended the opening of the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) in 2002. Becoming a docent in 2010 made me realise Tyler's dream had been surpassed.

I've always been attracted to prints and bought three by Frank Stella and Steven Sorman. Only after becoming a docent did I develop a new-found admiration for the prints that hang in my home, including the 97-colour Frank Stella print *Imaginary Places*.

Despite my interest in art history, the learning curve was steep. My appreciation of STPI continually grows from shared experiences with other docents, the artists and printmakers. Each time I guide I endeavor to decipher the medium and technique the artist has used to convey his message. Did Pinaree use collagraphy or etching? How did Heri Dono make the puppets stand? Ben Cabrera painted with paper pulp. And as for Suzann Victor's work, is that painting or printing?



STPI building, photo by Sabine Gebele-Pham

The institute has a resident Visiting Artist's Programme, so seeing the works in progress and interacting firsthand with the artists and printmakers makes guiding at STPI unique. This exposure to the artistic process is priceless.

The first exhibition I guided was Tabaimo's *emerge as* – in a delicate, self-effacing video installation the artist drew 'frames' of wallpaper. She meticulously captured insects in a maze of veins and hearts, thereby objectifying the dermatitis she suffers from and defying all printmaking conventions. So outstanding was the artwork that one was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art.

Another significant guiding experience was a project with Yu Ying Secondary School. Emotionally challenged, these students with psychological issues were labelled "at risk". We had them make a vision board, mirroring and mapping their neighbourhood, and a collagraph of self-portraits. This experience was transformative for these kids

– their work was exhibited at the school and they thrived academically.

Likewise, I've been fascinated to see paper stitched into masks (Eko Negruho), moulded into broccoli forests (Raymond Ventura), layered into fragile wings (Aqulizan), woven into stories (Dinh Q Lê), installed as large lungs that breathe (Entang Wiharso), embedded with spices (Haegue Yang) and transformed into larger-than-life puppets (Heri Dono). This joy of discovery and sense of wonder makes guiding at STPI ever fresh, ever new.

During every tour I learn how different viewers engage with art. You must think on your feet when the audience comprises tudung-wearing, adolescent girls who saw Pinaree Sanpitak's *Fragmented Bodies* whose key motif is a breast-shaped stupa. Or when a group of autistic kids arrives for a show that features textured paper resembling skin, hung in sheets from the ceiling. How can you stop them from touching it when you yourself are tempted?

Introducing an artist's abstract concepts is always challenging and especially so in papermaking and print. Paper can be thin, thick, deckle-edged, embossed, ripped, moulded, marbled, flocked or layered. Printmaking can use multiple processes and techniques, even painting with paper pulp. As docents, we highlight the workshop's wonders, the artists' collaboration and also the printers' technical expertise. We docents encapsulate in words the worlds an artist creates and attempt to make the visual visceral.

Besides the exhibition space, STPI showcases a workshop with a jumbo/ elephant press, a 500-ton hydraulic printing machine. This press was designed for Frank Stella's *Juam*, a collage of many hand-cast titanium plates with a three-dimensional surface. Another was nicknamed *Double Trouble* by James Rosenquist because it can do both etching and lithography. With Ken Tyler, "nothing was impossible", which the printmakers at STPI have repeatedly demonstrated. Sculpting, flocking, foiling, weaving and even embroidering paper, the paper mill never ceases to invent. As exhibitions change every six weeks, this provides me with the opportunity to meet artists from different countries, audiences from diverse backgrounds and to learn through these encounters. The love and care, the sharing with my fellow docents, however, have to be the highlights. This is my STPI family.



STPI guide Roopa Dewan

## Memorable Experiences at SYSNMH

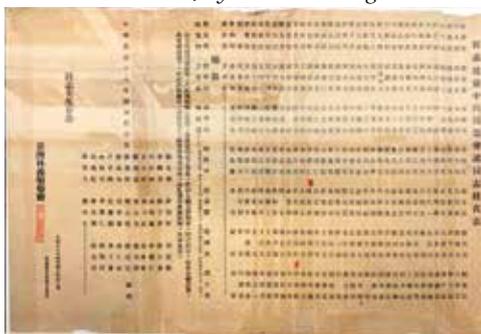
By Anne H Perng, Fung Long and Nelly Oh

A docent's job at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH) usually means connecting our visitors with the life and work of Dr Sun Yat Sen, the Father of Modern China, and the lives of his main supporters here in Singapore. Sometimes, a docent can do more than craft a good story.

### Connecting with One's Ancestors, by Anne H Perng

During one particular tour, a large family with multiple generations followed me and I found them especially keen on the revolutionary supporters from Singapore, then a British

Crown Colony. I had finished the story of Dr Sun's death and how memorial songs were sung and a commemorative book was published containing the names of the *Tongmenhui* (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance) members here at that time. This family peered into the glass cabinet and one of its members pointed and exclaimed excitedly, "There he is!" They had heard about an ancestor who had joined the *Tongmenhui* and were looking for evidence of this when they joined my tour. They found his name listed in the commemorative membership directory. I was so gratified to be able to effect this family 'reunion' after the granddaughter explained her family's participation in my tour.



Lim Nee Soon's list of Tongmenghui members, courtesy of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, photo by Anne H Perng

### A Five-Star Museum Tour, by Fung Long



Calligraphy with the Chinese characters Bo Ai (Universal Love), presented by Dr Sun Yat Sen to Teo Beng Wan, reproduced with permission from Mr Teo Chee Hean. Photo by Anne H Perng, courtesy of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

A five-star general, a five-star hotel, a five-star Amazon product review tour? Yes, this was the rating given by a Singapore Management University (SMU) student of a tour last November. SMU freshmen had attended a specially curated tour in conjunction with their module, *Big Questions-*

*Happiness and Suffering*. Armed with questions crafted by Jermaine Chua, Assistant Curator, docents engaged the students on the thesis and the apparent antithesis to the notion of happiness or suffering each of the chosen artefacts evoked.

One was the calligraphy of the Chinese characters *Bo Ai* (博愛) (meaning universal love), reflecting Dr Sun's belief in equality and democracy for all mankind. The students articulated their views on democracy when individual rights and freedom (happiness) may cause conflict (suffering) in communities that place collective welfare above the interests of the individual.

After the tour, an SMU lecturer wrote that her students had found the tour, "thought-provoking and different from any other they had encountered". I find guiding such tours enjoyable and now look at these artefacts with new insights and renewed enthusiasm, which I will bring to my tours when guiding resumes.

### Surprise Visitors, by Nelly Oh



Painting titled *Overseas Chinese - Mother of the Revolution*, by Li Shuji. Photo by Anne H Perng, courtesy of SYSNMH

After a brief introduction during my mentor tour, I led my group of seven, including my mentor Peggy and my husband, to a large photo of Dr Sun Yat Sen and his very important local supporters, Teo Eng Hock and Tan Chor Lam, to begin my storytelling. Thankfully, time passed quickly; it was not as frightening as I had imagined, and I very much enjoyed explaining Dr Sun's revolutionary activities in Singapore. The visitors were keen and attentive, their nods assured me I was on the right track.

It was only at the end of the tour, when viewing an oil painting titled *Overseas Chinese - Mother of the Revolution*, that two of the visitors announced they were descendants of another fervent local supporter of the revolutionary cause, Lim Nee Soon. Imagine if they had told me earlier, I would have freaked out, but they were kind and thoughtful, following me closely along the way. One needs to research and prepare well to be a docent, you never know whom you will meet, so the responsibility to share accurate information with visitors is real.

# URA/FOM Heritage Trails

By Gisella Harrold

I love history, discovering things and walking. So what is better than combining all of these and signing up for the unique URA/FOM Chinatown Heritage training. This is conducted together with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), founded in 1971. One of their key functions is the conservation of Singapore's heritage. The first project began in the 1980s with 32 shophouses in the Tanjong Pagar area. Today, more than 7,000 in over 100 areas have been renovated, but the focus of this training is what we consider as Chinatown. This interesting course takes a little over three months, excluding preparation time for the tour, which can take another two to three months.

The training is extensive, one learns not only the history of Singapore and the four precincts of Chinatown (Kreta Ayer, Telok Ayer, Bukit Pasoh and Tanjong Pagar), but also about the various immigrant groups who helped Singapore flourish. From the Armenians to the Chettiars, the Jackson Plan to William Pickering and the Chinese Protectorate, shophouses, festivals, temples, reclaimed land – these are just a few of the topics we covered.

We all loved the outings that were organised for us, while the preparation for “weekly words” was less enthusiastically welcomed. These were on a theme related to the lectures. In order to build a solid base and prepare for our future tours, we produced a fact sheet each week. To practise

our presentation skills, we had to present a version of the “weekly words”.

Eventually we had to decide which area to specialise in. In my case it was Tanjong Pagar, an often-overlooked area compared to the more popular ones such as Kreta Ayer. The majority of us were paired with another trainee, which means that the two-hour tour was halved and so was easier for a new guide.

From there we figured out our final tour, with facts and stories of Singapore history and culture. After a couple of trial runs, we conducted our first tour with fellow trainees and eventually our first full tour with an interested audience.

Practice makes perfect, which is why all of us were encouraged to guide as much as possible to build up our confidence. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we haven't been able to guide since February, but are hoping to restart guiding tours at the end of August. If URA/FOM heritage trails tours don't resume then, we look forward to being able to restart them when the pandemic subsides.



*We did long research walks to find the best locations to tell our story of Tanjong Pagar. Here we are in the Fairfield Methodist Church in Tanjong Pagar Road, which started its life as a cinema, as you can see by the staircase.*



*One of the special discoveries I made was that relatives of Jennifer Lim (of Jennifer Lim Art), have sponsored the Lim See Tai Chong Soon Kiu Leong Tong Clan house and temple in Cantonment Road.*



*The motto for the URA/Chinatown tours is “Come rain or shine the tour will be conducted”. Here we are doing our first ‘official tour’ and it poured with rain!*



*How to find out if the shophouse ‘five foot way’ is really five feet wide? Find a mentor, in our case Heather Muirhead, who is exactly five feet tall, and start measuring. As you can see, we had lots of fun working on our tour.*



*Seng Wong Beo Temple is a city temple and still has some unique features, such as this lion with an open mouth or the fact that it is both a Buddhist and a Daoist temple.*



*We did it, safe and sound back from our first tour, we received our badges.*

*Photos courtesy of the author*

# Double X: Women and Contemporary Art at STPI

By Angie Ng

This 1989 screen print is by the group of anonymous American women artists who call themselves the Guerrilla Girls. Here, they were grilling the Metropolitan Museum on why fewer than 5% of the artists in their Modern Art Sections are women, yet an overwhelming 85% of the nudes are female. Since the group's inception, they have instigated ongoing dialogues around the role of women in the arts, challenging gender constructs and the representation of female artists, especially in established cultural institutions. Several decades on, these issues are still at the forefront of discussion.



Guerrilla Girls

Here in Southeast Asia, women in the contemporary arts sphere are making their mark in distinctive ways. Their works and themes are as diverse and dynamic as they are significant. Singapore's STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery's last exhibitions were by women artists, Pinaree Sanpitak (Thailand) and Melati Suryodarmo (Indonesia).

## Pinaree Sanpitak

The Asian woman traditionally found in art is often a passive muse or seen through the exoticised lens of a foreigner. As a reaction to this, some contemporary women artists have used the female body as their point of inspiration. Take Pinaree



Pinaree

Sanpitak's latest exhibit at STPI entitled *Fragmented Bodies: The Personal and the Public* (September - November 2019). She is most well-known for her 'breast-stupa' motif, an abstract silhouette that is simultaneously the breast (an often sexualised body part yet also linked with motherhood) as well as the stupa (the Buddhist religious sacred structure). In this exhibition, this motif continually reinvents itself in her newest works based in collagraphy, monoprint and collage. While doing her artist residency at STPI, she was enamoured with papermaking, using all-natural materials such as

mulberry, abaca and linen – noting their varying tones as allusions to skin types. Through the papermaking process, sometimes stress marks and buckles in the paper appear. Though they are traditionally unwanted, Pinaree purposely kept them as nods to *stretch* marks, which are also familiar parts of womanhood and motherhood!

## Melati Suryodarmo

Another odious patriarchal notion is the cultural devaluation of women as they age, yet this could not be further from reality in contemporary art. Many women artists deepen their development as they mature, sharpening their instincts and intuition, pushing boundaries and drawing on a wealth of past experiences. Melati Suryodarmo's latest exhibition at STPI entitled *Memento Mori* (November 2019 - January 2020) demonstrates exactly that. Looking back on her own life, every house she had ever lived in has either been demolished or repurposed. In her works, she explores what it means to express these neglected histories, of physical space and of her own introspection of self, using materials that evoke transformation over time, such as charcoal. Her moss paper pulp paintings capture the likeness of moss growth as a "silent witness of time" and her paper casts are not only architectural, but also tell an intimate story of what makes a home.



Melati

There are many other examples of Asian women artists who have had residencies at STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery – Genevieve Chua, Amanda Heng and Han Sai Por to name a few. Be sure to check out who is coming next.

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**Angie Ng** has called Singapore home for 10 years while practising architecture and now guides the Chinatown Heritage Trail and STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery. She co-founded Art of a Sudden urban sketching workshops.

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# The Shōsō-in Exhibition

## A Window into a Japanese Treasure Trove

By Darlene D Kasten

The Shōsō-in at Tōdai-ji in Nara, Japan, is the oldest national treasure repository housing the largest collection of eighth century Silk Road artefacts in existence today. For the past 71 years, a select number of its contents has been displayed annually for the general public to view at the Nara National Museum. With an estimated average of 15,000 visitors *every day* over its three-week run, it is not only the most popular exhibition in Japan but arguably in the world.

With such a staggering daily viewership, you might think the atmosphere would resemble any other blockbuster museum exhibition in the world. But the reverence and respect with which the Japanese visitors approach each individual artefact, make it feel less like they are ogling a prized curiosity than honouring a beloved leader lying in state.



The Shōsō-in at Tōdai-ji

And in a way they are. The significance of these works lies not only in their status as priceless masterpieces, but also in their inestimable cultural value that grows with each passing year. Along with national treasures made for ancient Buddhist ceremonies or for personal use by an Imperial family, the Shōsō-in holds Tang dynasty Chinese and other irreplaceable Silk Road articles collected by the eighth century Emperor Shōmu during his reign and then dedicated en masse to the Tōdai-ji Temple upon his death.

The Nara period emperor who initiated the collection ascended the throne in 724 CE, taking the reign name Shōmu. In 729, his consort, a member of the powerful albeit common Fujiwara family, was declared empress, shattering the precedent that all empress consorts had to be princesses of the blood. Emperor Shōmu and Empress Kōmyō were both devout Buddhists and actively promoted the spread of



Bronze mirror, lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, lapis and turquoise. Container, lacquer with paintings of flowers and birds in gold and silver



Silver tray with repoussé deer and flower motif

Buddhism during their reign, making it the “guardian of the state.”

Emperor Shōmu reigned for 25 years before abdicating in favour of his daughter who became Empress Kōken. Shōmu was the first retired emperor to become a Buddhist priest and Kōmyō, following her husband’s example, also took holy vows to become a Buddhist nun.

After the emperor died in 756, the empress was grief-stricken. Whenever she saw his precious treasures, she would feel a piercing sadness as she recalled the days spent with her husband while he was alive. She offered around 650 of Emperor Shōmu’s beloved treasures to the Great Buddha of Tōdai-ji Temple, with a prayer that her late husband would be swiftly delivered to a peaceful afterlife in the Buddhist Pure Land. Protected and passed down to the present day as the Shōsō-in treasures, the emotion upon seeing them displayed today is still palpable.

To house what has now become a trove of approximately 9,000 treasures, an *azekura* log-cabin-style, wooden storeroom some 300 square metres in area was built on Tōdai-ji grounds sometime before 759 and there the treasures stayed for over a millennium, unscathed by the ravages of war, natural disasters and the passage of time. For most of that time, they were under the direct control of the imperial family and could be seen by only a select few. To take them out of the storeroom, one had to obtain the seal of the current emperor and the approval of the Tōdai-ji monks.

The first time a significant number of the objects was displayed to the general public was in 1940 in Tokyo, when an exhibition of some 140 pieces was curated to celebrate the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of the empire. More than 400,000 visitors saw the exhibition. Toward the end of World War II, as fears grew that the wooden storeroom might be bombed by the Allies, the contents were moved to the nearby Nara National Museum, which had a state-of-the-art concrete storeroom.



Leather belt, lapis lazuli and silver on hide. Accompanying container, lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, gold and quartz crystal, interior lined with silk brocade

Then in 1946 after the war ended, the public asked for the collection to be put on display again. Japan had lost the war, lost its confidence and was, as a nation, utterly dejected. The show reminded the more than 150,000 visitors of their extraordinary national culture and struck many people with the feeling that a new era had begun. It was the first iteration of what would become an annual exhibition of Shōsō-in treasures.

Afterwards, the collection moved back to the wooden storeroom at Tōdai-ji and eventually to new, dedicated concrete storage facilities specially built nearby. Ever since, for about three weeks every autumn when the storerooms are traditionally opened for maintenance and conservation, a varied selection continues to be displayed at the Nara National Museum.

The annual exhibition was held 40 times

in the Showa era and 30 times in the Heisei era. In 2019, Japan welcomed the dawn of the Reiwa era and from the 26 October to 14 November of last year, 41 treasures were displayed in Nara as part of the 71<sup>st</sup> Annual Exhibition of Shōsō-in Treasures. At the same time, to commemorate the enthronement of Emperor Naruhito, an unprecedented second exhibition showcasing another 46 treasures took place in Tokyo at the National Museum in Ueno Park, alongside other culturally significant pieces from the formative Asuka and Nara periods (593-794).



Five-stringed biwa lute, red sandalwood, lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, amber and tortoise-shell

On display in Tokyo was the original Record of Imperial Bequest to Tōdai-ji Temple dated 756. A rare treasure itself, it includes the list of the original bounty offered by Empress Kōmyō. Other highlights from the Tokyo and Nara exhibitions included an eight-lobed bronze mirror with mother-of-pearl, lapis and turquoise inlay on lacquer and a six-lobed gilt silver tray featuring a repoussé flower-antlered deer, both from eighth century Tang dynasty China.

Music's significant place in global history was exhibited with a pair of red sandalwood biwa lutes looking strikingly like the stringed instrument played by one of the seven musicians featured on the Tang shipwreck's gold cup in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum.

The five-stringed biwa lute's design can be traced back to India. It has all but disappeared now with the Shōsō-in housing the only known example in the world. Its mother-of-pearl inlay features a resplendent design of a tropical tree and a Sogdian musician strumming a biwa while riding a Bactrian camel. The roots of the four-stringed biwa lute lie in Persia. With its characteristic bent neck, it features marquetry decoration – an inlay design made of small pieces of coloured wood and a painted leather plectrum guard depicting more musicians atop a white elephant.



Four-stringed biwa lute, red sandalwood, marquetry and painted leather

The Shōsō-in treasures also include a large number of textiles. These are the world's oldest examples of objects passed down from person to person as opposed to excavated objects. On display was the patchwork, quilted seven-panel *kasaya* with mottled colours, one of nine priest's surplices listed in the Record of the Nation's National Treasures. It is possible that Emperor Shōmu wore this very *kasaya*.

Most interesting to me were other personal effects of the imperial family, such as the leather belt segments with lapis lazuli decoration, from Afghanistan, complete with its round silk-lined mother-of-pearl inlay lacquer container. Fragments of the imperial crowns worn by Emperor Shōmu, Empress Kōmyō and Empress Kōken for the Consecration Ceremony of the Great Buddha at Tōdai-ji in 752 were an especially meaningful display in the new emperor's enthronement year.

For future scheduling of the annual exhibition of Shōsō-in treasures in Nara, visit [www.narahaku.go.jp](http://www.narahaku.go.jp).

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**Darlene D Kasten** is an FOM docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Malay Heritage Centre and STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery.

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Photos courtesy of the Office of the Shōsō-in, Imperial Household Agency

# Of Gods and People - The Story of Jasmine

By Seema Shah

*At dawn, Madurai wakes to the sound of the Vedas and the air is perfumed with the scent of flowers.*

British historian Michael Wood's evocative image of Madurai, ancient India's seat of power, highlights the city's inextricable relationship with its native flower, the famed *jasminum sambac*, known locally as *Madurai malligai*.



*The Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple*

On a recent visit to this bustling city in southern India, I visited a frenetic market where buyers of the French perfume houses of Dior and Chanel come to locate these jasmine flowers, which help create the scents they are renowned for. I also had the opportunity to meet with Dr Uma Kannan, a cultural anthropologist, whose passion for the flower led her to write a book about it.

Although the jasmine flower is cultivated across the subcontinent, few places are as closely linked with it as is the temple town of Madurai. Jasmine has played a vital role in Madurai's social fabric and economy from time immemorial, making the city the flower's motherland. This can be attributed in part to the large number of temples here, the most famous being the Madurai Meenakshi temple, one of the few whose presiding deity is female.

Grown for centuries and offered to the gods, the fragrant white blossoms can also be seen adorning the long, plaited hair of women who throng the streets of this pilgrimage centre, very much as we do on the streets of Little India in Singapore.



*Dr Uma Kannan who has worked tirelessly to gain the Geographic Indications (GI) tag, a measure of quality*

"When I arrived in Madurai in the 1970s, the city seemed to revel in an abundance of jasmine. The only Indian Airlines flight to Chennai, known as the 'Malli Special', would be transporting basket loads of Madurai *malli*," writes Uma Kannan, in her recently published book, *Madurai Malligai*.

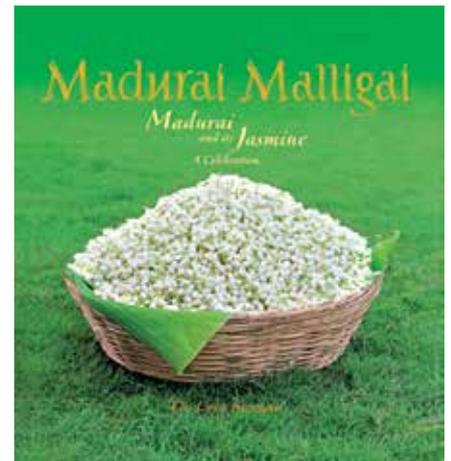
Kannan further shared her insights into the special relevance of this flower, as well as the lives and stories of the jasmine weavers.

The Indian jasmine, poetically referred to as "moonbeams in the garden" or "the queen of flowers", is one of the oldest fragrant flowers to be grown commercially.

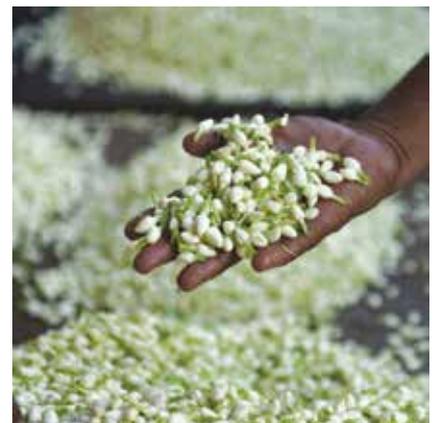
Considered *sattvic* (pure) and auspicious, it has been mentioned in the *Vedas*, the *Mahabharata* and *Kama Sutra*. Tracing its history, she says, "There are extensive references to the flower in *Sangam* literature – the Tamil poems of the period 300 BCE to 300 CE." The poems describe how Pari, a Tamil king, gifted his royal chariot to a jasmine vine so it could wrap itself around it, simply because he could not bear to see the frail creeper on the hard forest floor.

There are also numerous representations of the flower in the sculptures of South India, dating to the fifth and seventh centuries. Deities are depicted wearing jasmine garlands and sometimes the flower features on the borders of sculpted panels. At the Madurai Meenakshi temple, one of the grandest temples in southern India, rituals are performed six times a day, all involving the extensive use of the *malligai*.

In the spring festival of Chithirai, it appears as if all the jasmine produced in this temple town in Tamil Nadu ends up adorning the goddess's shrine – from garlands to the decorations on her mythical beast *yaali*, to her floral palanquin, which will carry her to her wedding with Lord Sundareswarar. The couple – incarnations of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati



*Dr Uma Kannan's book on the Madurai Malligai*



*The unique greenish buds of the jasmine from Madurai*

– live happily ever after, the jasmine on Meenakshi’s nuptial pendant marking their contentment and love.

According to Kannan, the Madurai jasmine has four characteristics that help it stand above the rest. The region’s unique laterite soil, rich in sulphur, is the secret behind the heady, fragrance-causing alkaloids, jasmone and alpha-terpineol. Compared to other varieties of jasmine grown in various parts of the country, Madurai *malligai* has thicker petals, which allow the flowers to retain moisture and delay the process of withering. As a result, the flowers are easier to work with, especially for garland weavers.



*Brisk trade at the local flower market*

“Madurai *malligai* is the only variety that is greenish white when it is picked in the morning”, she adds, “It turns milky white and then shiny, creamy white in the evening.” Another unique feature is that the *malligai* blooms after 6:00 pm, unlike the other varieties that bloom by 5:00 pm, ensuring a longer shelf-life for the flower.

The *malligai* are handpicked by women whose day begins as early as 3:00 am. Armed with headlamps, they make their way to the farm to pick the fleshy white buds and don’t stop until it’s time for their morning rice gruel. Packed in jute or palm-leaf baskets, the buds are hurriedly transported to flower markets by 6:00 am,



*Women usually string the flowers*

as even the smallest delay can cause the buds to unfurl in the heat. “It’s like a stock market here; prices fluctuate daily depending on the season,” says Palaniswamy, who owns four processing units in Coimbatore, Madurai, Bangalore and Agra. “Flowers that cost Rs 100 per kilo could go up to Rs 102 per kilo the next minute,” he says. During peak festival season, prices have shot as high as Rs 1,000 per kilogram.

Middlemen-traders sell the blooms to garland makers and flower sellers. Strings and loose flowers are wrapped in banana leaves, tied with banana twine – a trend that’s sadly changing owing to plastic bags and cotton thread – and sold on the streets of Madurai the same day. Bulk orders of its commercial varieties are packaged and transported to other cities and countries in thermocol boxes lined with tekno-ice packs to keep the buds fresh. There is a great demand for them among the Indian diaspora in places such as Malaysia, Singapore, Dubai and also in western Europe, especially France.

In 2013, the Madurai *malligai* or *malli* (jasmine) received a GI tag, (given for goods whose quality and reputation are

attributable to their place of origin), joining the ranks of iconic products such as Darjeeling tea and Pochampalli saris.

As one of the key supporters of the farmers’ efforts for the GI tag, Kannan has spent hours with farmers, flower sellers, shopkeepers and garland weavers, studying the life cycle of the graceful bloom. “The GI tag gave the flower its due credit and respectability,” she says.

She has also been instrumental in organising garland-



*Jasmine garlands adorn deities*

making classes for women. “Women were given the labour-intensive, monotonous job of tying jasmine strings, which barely yielded a few rupees per metre, while men dominated the garland market, which needs less labour, but fetches up to Rs 300 per garland. It’s clearly a business where women do much of the work, but it’s the men who seem to be reaping the rewards,” she recalls.

Recognising that modern, western-attired women no longer wear jasmine strings in their hair, Kannan organises workshops for local flower weavers and tourists where they learn innovative ways to use the flower, making bracelets, in-home décor pieces and personal products. This was done in association with the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, with which Kannan is associated.

The workshops also urged members of the flower industry not to wrap the flowers in plastic bags but revert to the traditional method of wrapping them in plantain leaves.

“I wish the market was more organised so that these women’s lives would also bloom along with the industry; they are constantly in debt to middlemen. Even then, they never complain. They say tying jasmine strings gives them a lot of peace. Who knows? Perhaps it is owing to the benefits of aromatherapy,” she adds. In the end, the Madurai *malli* symbolizes ancient Tamil traditions, and as long as women love flowers and people need them for rituals and weddings, there will always be a market for the Madurai *malli*.

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**Seema Shah** has been actively involved with the Friends of the Museums and the ACM in various capacities. Her areas of interest are traditional textiles and Indian art and history.

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*Photos by the author and from Dr Kannan’s book*

# Rochor Canal

By Amanda Jaffe



*Rain gardens along the banks of Rochor Canal*

If you want to see a city all dressed up, walk along its riverfront. To see that city without its makeup, natural and more interesting, walk along its canals. Paris has the Seine, but it also has Canal Saint-Martin. Singapore has the Singapore River, but one of my favourite walks is along Rochor Canal.

Technically, Rochor Canal is one stretch of a waterway with several names. Depending on the location, it's known as Bukit Timah Canal, Rochor Canal and, for its final stretch, the Rochor River. Singapore's Public Utilities Board (PUB) redeveloped Rochor Canal, running from Jalan Besar to Crawford Street, in 2015. At 1.1 kilometres, it may not be long on distance, but it's long on character and history.

Rochor Canal was always a purposeful waterway. Early on, it was a critical water source for cattle trading activities around Serangoon Road. Over time, its usefulness as a waterway fuelled the surrounding area's growth as an early Singaporean industrial centre. In the 1880s, sawmills, rice mills, and oil mills were built along the banks of the canal near the Kallang River. Singapore's first municipal incinerators appeared canal-side in 1889, followed shortly thereafter by municipal abattoirs in nearby Jalan Besar, another offshoot of the cattle trade. Manufacturing and light industry in the area continued to develop, including



*Wave Bridge, one of two pedestrian bridges that cross Rochor Canal*

Singapore's first ice works, built nearby in the 1930s. While little physical evidence remains of these activities, one still finds the occasional reminder. The Sim Lim name appears on buildings selling electronics near the Jalan Besar end of the canal, but the business began as a timber company in the 1930s.

Activities along Rochor Canal weren't strictly limited to enterprise. For several decades in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the area around the canal near Syed Alwi Road was also home to Kampong Boyan, a community of immigrants from the Indonesian island of Pulau Bawean.

Today, the hustle and bustle are gone. The canal functions as more of a shared backyard for the buildings that front the busy streets surrounding it. One distinct advantage of this is that the buildings block traffic noise, enabling one to walk *through* the city along the Canal while enjoying a respite *from* the city – truly the best of both worlds.

The pleasures of walking along Rochor Canal are thanks in no small part to the Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters (ABC Waters) Programme run by the PUB, Singapore's national water agency. With over 8,000 kilometres of waterways and 17 reservoirs around the island, the PUB launched ABC Waters in 2006 to integrate Singapore's drains, canals and reservoirs with their surroundings for the benefit of the community. The result benefits both Singaporean waterways and Singaporean lives.

Rochor Canal was the first ABC Waters project in Singapore's downtown area, completed over three years for S\$48 million. While the project's primary practical purpose was to increase the canal's drainage capacity, the landscape architecture firm Ramboll Studio Dreiseitl Asia oversaw the project to carry out ABC Waters principles.

Where there once was a small path, a wide, comfortable promenade now runs along the length of Rochor Canal. At the Jalan Besar end, the white sail roof of Gateway Plaza offers a shady place to rest and gather. Pergolas and lookout

decks along the promenade invite contemplation or socialising at the water's edge. Fishing decks encourage visitors to drop a line, while footbridges facilitate a trip from one side of the canal to the other, connecting neighbourhoods the canal used to bisect. And throughout, rain gardens designed to filter rainwater before it runs off into the canal supply a profusion of greenery and color.

A walk along the length of Rochor Canal takes you past a number of sights, some visible and some long gone. Here are a few of the more noteworthy, starting from Jalan Besar and walking downstream toward Crawford Street.

In addition to Sim Lim Tower, the canal's Jalan Besar terminus is anchored by the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes. Gazetted in 2005 as a national monument, it was built between 1886 and 1888 to serve Singapore's Indian Catholic community, offering services in Tamil.

A short distance downstream, Sungei Road briefly parallels the canal's left bank, across from the blue and yellow Stamford Primary School. This was the home of the Sungei Road Flea Market, also known as "Robinson's in the Afternoon" and the "Thieves Market". Singapore's oldest flea market was the place to find secondhand goods and goods of perhaps questionable provenance, from the 1930s until it was finally closed in 2017.

Just past Stamford Primary School, Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah is the second-oldest madrasah in Singapore, built in 1927. The current building dates from 2000, on the site of the original, two-story colonial style building.

The Kelantan Court HDB complex lies across the canal from the madrasah. The HDB's open spaces open onto the promenade, complementing one another. Cross over the nearby Sunset Bridge for a closer look.

Cross back over the Sunset Bridge to walk alongside Jalan Kubor, Singapore's oldest Muslim cemetery. Jalan Kubor is actually three burial grounds, long closed with some limited exceptions. The Sultan's Burial Ground was designated for members of Sultan Hussein's royal household, although Singapore's two sultans, Sultan Hussein and Sultan Ali, were buried in Malacca. The adjoining Malay Burial Ground became known as the Aljunied Burial Ground, as members of the Aljunied family were buried there. The third section, granted for the burial of Indian Muslims residing in Kampong Glam, is also notable for the blue-tiled, gold-domed Malabar Mosque (from 1963), which occupies the corner where Victoria Street meets Jalan Sultan. Jalan Kubor's days may be numbered, as the Urban



*Tua Pek Kong Temple amid a quiet carpark*

Redevelopment Authority's Master Plan has it marked for future development.

A bit farther downstream, you'll need to leave the canal to cross Victoria Street (use the pedestrian crossing to your right), then jog back to your left to return waterside. Here, the canal's last long bend sweeps past the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority on the left bank (cross using the Wave Bridge if you wish to visit). Along the right bank, stroll past fishing piers and the Crawford Court HDB complex until you come to the rear of North Bridge Road Market and Food Centre, with its cream-coloured façade speckled with multicoloured rectangles.



*View toward Kelantan Court HDB Complex*

Between the canal and the food centre sits Tua Pek Kong Temple, built by food centre vendors at their own expense in 1974. This small simple temple, situated in the middle of a car park, started as an altar. These days, the vendors seem to be its main visitors and it seems as much a gathering spot as a place for prayer. It's well worth a few moments of your time, but take care to dodge the cars as they come and go.

Beyond the temple, Rochor Canal becomes the Rochor River. If you wish to continue, a pedestrian tunnel under Crawford Street leads you to the point where the Rochor River meets the Kallang Basin.

Walk along Rochor Canal and be restored as you enjoy its mix of history, development and community. Start your stroll near Sim Lim Tower, where Rochor Canal Road meets Ophir Road.



*Gravestones cover the grounds of Jalan Kubor*

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**Amanda Jaffe** is an active FOM member with a deep interest in studying and writing about the history and culture of Singapore and neighbouring countries.

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*All photos by the author*



# Staying Put for the Summer

## Armchair Travels to the Rescue

By Abha Dayal Kaul

In this pandemic year, all of us have sorely missed something we always did with great ease and took entirely for granted - travelling. A situation with no leisure travel was quite unimaginable. To address this gap and keep the thrill of travel alive, Friends of the Museums decided to treat our members to a round of virtual journeys this past July and August, prime travelling months in a normal world.

This report sums up the Study Tours team offerings to alleviate the ennui of no travel, and to share some of the wonder of past tours via a series of armchair travels. The Monday Morning Lectures team took a break, and we organised a set of seven talks by seven speakers on diverse destinations, each presentation being delivered twice, on a Monday morning and again on a Thursday evening, for the benefit of those who missed the first talk or for overseas members.

I kicked off the set of virtual travels with my lecture on the legendary Buddhist Pilgrimage tour in India on 6 July, the Dalai Lama's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, an auspicious date. It was the perfect day to recall the Buddha's life and enduring message, on the birth anniversary of the world's most famous living Buddhist. He has made his home in India, land of the historical Buddha's birth and journey over 2,500 years ago.



Buddhist pilgrimage tour group at Bodh Gaya

This talk transported the audience to the principal places of Buddhism – four major sites the Buddha advised his followers and pilgrims to visit at least once in their lifetimes: Lumbini, where he was born as Prince Siddhartha; Bodh Gaya, Buddhism's most sacred site, where he was 'awakened' and became the Buddha under the holy bodhi tree; Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon and set the *Dharmachakra* teachings into motion; and Kushinagar, where he left his mortal body and attained *Mahaparinirvana*, complete liberation.

We also visited less-travelled but renowned Buddhist spots: ancient Kapilavastu, where the young Prince Siddhartha was raised in his father's palace; Shravasti, where the Buddha spent several rainy seasons and performed miracles; Vaishali, where he preached for the last time; Rajgir, where he taught well-known *sutras* atop Vulture's Peak; and Nalanda, the excavated site of the first and largest-ever university in the world, seat of Buddhist studies and art.

It was a joy for me to share the discoveries of travellers on two FOM study tours that I led to these pilgrimage sites,



Whirling dervishes in Konya, Turkey

tracing the Buddha's footsteps, and learning of India's priceless legacy to the world through Buddhist ideas, art and architecture.

In our second week, Gisella Harrold took us along on winter adventures in Turkey, exotic land of Rumi and the whirling dervishes. We followed a group of FOM travellers from Istanbul through Ankara, to the mystic and snowy Cappadocia, past long stretches of deserts and caravanserais before finally arriving at their destination, Konya, home of the Mevlevi Sufi order, also known as the whirling dervishes. It was founded by the followers of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, 13<sup>th</sup> century poet, Sufi mystic and Islamic theologian who is to this day a much loved and quoted figure throughout the world. Konya hosts a lavish festival every year in December around Rumi's death anniversary, 17 December, which presented a unique opportunity to watch authentic dervishes dance in spiritual ecstasy up close.

Thereafter, Alexandra Domart drew us back nearer home to explore the rich arts and culture scene in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia – from temples and palaces to contemporary art. We visited the world's largest Buddhist monument, Borobudur, constructed in the late eighth century by the Shailendras, as well as the massive Hindu temple complex at Prambanan, built in the mid ninth century by the Sanjaya dynasty. We wandered around the Kraton, the sultan's 18<sup>th</sup> century palace complex and its water gardens, the Taman Serai, before diving



Sunset at Borobudur, the world's largest Buddhist monument



Women dancers performing during a festival in Bhutan



The FOM study tour group in Jerusalem

into contemporary times and art. Alexandra introduced us to Dr Oei and his OHD museum in Magelang, and also Heri Dono and Entang Wiharso at their spectacular art studios there and exhibitions here in Singapore.

Next, Khatiza Van Savage whisked us away to the enchanting Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. Through the tiny country's natural beauty, unique culture and ruling families, we learned of the wonderful concept of Gross National Happiness, a philosophy



Mount Hengshan in Shanxi province, North China

envisioned by King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. Our virtual journey began in Paro, where airplanes land dramatically between mountain ranges in the only valley wide enough to do so, a breathtaking entry into a land steeped in closely guarded traditions. With the FOM group we met Bhutan's king on the last day of the Paro Tsechu Spring Festival, in honour of the famous eighth century Guru Padmasambhava who brought Buddhism to Bhutan from India, and we also hiked up a steep hill to picturesque Taktsang or Tiger's Nest Monastery, where the guru is said to have arrived on a flying tigress and meditated in a cave. It was delightful to participate in hot stone baths, beer tasting and a cultural event, dressed in Bhutan's national outfit, the Kira or Goh.

Crossing Himalayan borders, in the following week we ventured with Patricia Welch into northern China, beyond the ancient frontier of the Great Wall, along the upper parts of the Yellow River. In this seldom-visited land of long history and rich, ancient cultures, Patricia led us to outstanding historical sites, from the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang to the ancient capital of the Xixia Dynasty. In Inner Mongolia, China's province abutting the sovereign nation of Mongolia, we explored grottoes, imperial tombs, Liao Buddhist pagodas and China's oldest remaining wooden structure before ending our armchair travels at the stunning historical Qiao Residence where the film *Raise the Red Lantern* was shot by award-winning Chinese director, Zhang Yimou.

From East Asia we travelled westwards with Sarah Lev, on a journey to Israel and Jordan. This region was and still is an important crossroads between Europe and Asia, and a sacred centre for believers of the world's three great monotheistic religions. Historically it was bitterly fought over by the Romans, Byzantines, Muslims, Crusaders, Mamelukes and Ottomans, to name a few.

Sarah covered a timeline from King David to modern Israel, including a number of famous archaeological and holy places, museums, street-art spots and local markets. From our homes, we visited the ancient sites of Caesarea, Acre, Beit She'an and Jerusalem's Old City. We marvelled at views from the mountains of Galilee, Mount Carmel, Mount of Olives and the Golan Heights; we drove to the Judean desert, floated on the Dead Sea and ended the trip in Jordan at Wadi Rum and Petra, famously featured in an Indiana Jones movie.

Our Zoom travels concluded with Rosalie Kwok taking us on a textile tour to West Timor, in the southernmost reaches of Southeast Asia. Timor was known as the "Island of Sandalwood" along the ancient maritime trade routes and is part of today's East Nusa Tenggara province. At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was caught in a web of fierce colonial rivalry, which split the island into two. Through Rosalie's presentation we discovered the mysteries of Indonesia's West Timor, where smiles are genuine and traditional beliefs run deep. We witnessed a thanksgiving festival in the former headhunting village of Nome, whose residents practise a blend of animism and Christianity. Colourful motifs and the diverse techniques of the Timorese people's unique woven textile heritage fascinated us.



West Timorese wearing their own woven textiles

Miss travelling? We trust our armchair travels have been a joyful distraction, a source of continued learning about Asia, and a welcome balm for everyone itching to travel again. For those who missed the presentations, please enjoy reading about them. Let's keep our spirits up, until we travel again!

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**Abha Dayal Kaul** is an FOM docent, travel buff and Coordinator of Study Tours, keenly awaiting the opening up of travel once the pandemic abates.

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Photos courtesy of the tour leaders

# Explore Singapore!

We have not forgotten about you and your interest in our tours! Have a look at the diverse and exciting programmes we have lined up for you. Things are looking up and we are making plans to resume our tours. We will post the dates once they are confirmed.



## Exploring Balestier Road – A Heritage Trail off the Beaten Track

Date: To be announced  
10:00 am – 12:00 noon  
Fee: \$25

Few people have heard of Balestier Road or know that it is part of a heritage trail. Singaporeans shop here for lighting, bathroom equipment, as well as good food. Balestier has a rich history with links to the first American Consul to Singapore and Dr Sun Yat Sen. It is also home to one of the earliest Malay film studios and various temples including one with a permanent *wayang* (opera) stage. Join us on this heritage walk and discover another facet of Singapore and its history.



## Little India Heritage Walk

Date: To be announced  
10:00 am – 12:00 noon  
Fee: \$25

Join us on a guided walking tour of Little India; wander along its shophouse-lined streets

and experience the hustle and bustle of an organic, evolving neighbourhood. Among colourful stores and landmarks, learn about its rich history. We will walk its vibrant streets, stopping at points of interest, including commercial establishments, places of worship and the Indian Heritage Centre. This will give you fascinating glimpses into early and contemporary Singapore and help you gain new insights into our island state's diverse Indian communities



## An Introduction to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

Date: To be announced  
11:00 am – 1:00 pm  
Fee: \$25

For more than 2,000 years

the Chinese have used a system of medicine known as Traditional Chinese Medicine or TCM. The underlying concepts and theories of TCM treat the body, mind and emotions (or spirit) as a single entity and its practices take a holistic approach to prevention and cure. TCM often includes nutritional therapies, treatments such as acupuncture, cupping, massage or *tuina*, and exercises such as *taiqi*. Join us and learn about TCM's basic principles and practices, followed by a visit to a traditional Chinese medical shop.



## The Joy and Fun of Gamelan – a Workshop

Date: To be announced  
10:00 am – 12:30 pm  
Fee: \$30

Those who have travelled to Indonesia

must have heard melodic tinkling music welcoming guests to hotels and restaurants. It is often played live, so you may have seen the musicians with their instruments – the gamelan. This is a unique opportunity to learn about the differences between Javanese and Balinese gamelan orchestras, about the instruments and also how to play them. You will learn about the gamelan's history, traditions and related cultural activities such as *wayang kulit* (Indonesian shadow puppetry) and Javanese dance.



## Kampongs in the Sky

Date: To be announced  
10:00 am – 12:00 noon  
Fee: \$30

Singapore's government housing programme is one of the nation's great success stories.

Housing Development Board (HDB) estates are all around us, but we often know very little about them. How did the population of Singapore go from living in rural villages (*kampongs*) to high-rise apartments while still keeping the community spirit intact? We will tour one of the earliest town centres on foot, Toa Payoh, built in 1966. You will see what makes this a lively, self-contained hub, the nucleus of every HDB estate. An optional local lunch will follow.



## Ethnobotany Garden Tour

Date: To be announced  
Time: 10 am – 12:00 noon  
Fee: \$30

Tucked away into a corner of the Botanic Gardens is a special Ethnobotany Garden,

featuring a large variety of ordinary, as well as unusual plants, most of which are native to Southeast Asia and have been used for centuries in this part of the world, and other regions, for food, medicine, cultural practices and material crafts. Join us on this specially organised tour and gain an understanding of another aspect of the history of this region – its plants and their historical, economic and anthropological roles.

## Island Notes

# Memories

By Darly Furlong



Since no one is travelling for leisure any time soon, I began to reminisce about a past holiday, a visit to the fabulous Ishtar Gate. The Ishtar Gate, built by King Nebuchadnezzar II in 575 BCE, stood at the entrance to the city of Babylon (Iraq), as a dedication to the goddess Ishtar, and formed part of the processional way to the temple of Marduk. It was made beautiful through the use of a background of glazed blue bricks and brown bricks onto which representations of lions, bulls and dragons in yellow had been painted. This amazing piece of artistry was a great feat for a sixth century BCE civilisation. Today, the reconstructed gate stands in the Pergamon Museum of Berlin; its glazed bricks still glint like a gleam in the eye and hold their secrets close.



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**Darly Furlong** is a passionate volunteer of museum-based learning for children and leads other causes in Singapore that facilitate social justice.

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## Japanese Docents

Last year, I paid a brief visit to England and stopped over in London for a couple of days before taking a return flight. As I had only a short time, I had to plan my schedule well and wanted to include a visit to the British Museum, a fascinating destination. I headed straight for my favourite gallery, the Egyptian collection, but on the way there I saw an unexpected poster, *Sir Stamford Raffles: collecting in Southeast Asia 1811-1824*.

I had acted as a guide for this exhibition when it was on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, but I was not aware that it had moved on to London, so this was a pleasant



surprise. I made a detour. A portrait of Raffles, which hadn't been on display in Singapore, stood at the entrance just inside the exhibition room. Although quite small, the room was lined with familiar items. When the exhibition closed in Singapore, I thought I wouldn't see these beautiful items again, so it was like seeing old friends.

In this COVID-19 situation, I don't know when the next special exhibition will be held. I very much hope we can start doing research for the next exhibition and look forward to sharing new knowledge with fellow JDs and guests. I want others to experience the joy of learning about historical treasures and perhaps one day they will also unexpectedly meet old friends again.

Naoko Staples, Japanese Docent

## Asian Study Group

The Silk Road – revisited! Last studied in 2016, this theme is a perpetual favourite. Join us as we study silk, spices, traders, camels, forts, dhows, roads, the Belt and Road Initiative, Buddhism, Central Asian cities and so many other interesting topics all associated with the Silk Road. This study group will be conducted on the Zoom platform. An organisational meeting will be held on Wednesday 9 September. There will be 8 meetings from 23 September to 18 November, with two presentations per meeting. Suggested topics can be found on the FOM Study Group webpage.

**Please note, all participants are expected to present on a topic.** Once we have received 16 sign-ups, we will decide whether to open slots for auditors. If auditor slots become available, auditors will be expected to pay the same study group fee and to attend all sessions.

**Registration opens on Wednesday 2 September at 2:00 pm**



# Coordinators Contact List



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# Museum Information and Exhibitions

*Please check individual museum websites for the latest information on guided tours by FOM docents.*

## Asian Civilisations Museum

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555

Tel: 6332 7798

[www.acm.org.sg](http://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, 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.

### New Gallery: Material and Design

Visit the museum's newest galleries which mark the completion of the museum's multi-year refresh as Singapore's museum of Asian antiquities and decorative art. The third-floor galleries are focused on decorative art and are collectively themed Materials and Design. The two new galleries, Fashion and Textiles, and Jewellery, together with the refreshed Ceramics gallery, comprise a display of over 300 precious and finely crafted masterpieces, telling stories of Asian identities, histories, and cultures.

## Gillman Barracks

9 Lock Road, Singapore 108937

[www.gillmanbarracks.com](http://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 online 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](http://www.fom-gillman-barracks.eventbrite.com)

## NTU CCA

Non-Aligned

(through 27 Sept)

The various colonial territories of the British Empire gained their sovereignty and independence at different times, in processes of decolonisation that played out in the histories of nations, but also determined the lives of individuals. Non-Aligned brings together three moving image works by artists, filmmakers and writers, works that look into the challenging transition periods from colonial rule to the independence of nations.

## Indian Heritage Centre

5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924

[www.indianheritage.org.sg](http://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 and Fri

12:00 pm for the permanent galleries

11:00 am on Wed and Fri for the special exhibitions

Tamil tours (FOM) 11:30am on the first Friday of each month for the special exhibition

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.

### From the Coromandel Coast to the Straits - Revisiting Our Tamil Heritage (through 30 Sept)

The exhibition presents a compendium of narratives that recount the



experiences of Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia and Singapore from pre-modern to contemporary times. It is presented in two parts: the first enumerates the odyssey of pre-modern Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia while the second offers glimpses of lesser known 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneers and some of the oldest Tamil families in Singapore. It also includes digital showcases featuring holograms of artefacts in the collections of other museums and institutions

## Malay Heritage Centre

85 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198501

Tel: 6391 0450

[www.malayheritage.org.sg](http://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 exhibitions, 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](http://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.

## NUS Museum,

NUS Centre for the Arts

University Cultural Centre

50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119279

Tel: 6516 8817

[www.museum.nus.edu.sg](http://www.museum.nus.edu.sg)

Free admission

### 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.

NUS Baba House

157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883

Tel: 6227 5731

[www.babahouse.nus.edu.sg](http://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](http://babahouse.nus.edu.sg/visit/plan-your-visit)

For enquiries, please email [babahouse@nus.edu.sg](mailto:babahouse@nus.edu.sg)

Now conceived as a heritage house facilitating research, the 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](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)

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. The museum is currently closed to prepare for its next phase of development.



# Museum Information and Exhibitions

**Singapore Art Museum**  
71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555  
Tel: 6332 3222  
[www.singaporeartmuseum.sg](http://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg)

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.



**STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery**  
41 Robertson Quay, Singapore 238236  
Tel: 6336 3663  
[www.stpi.com.sg](http://www.stpi.com.sg)

**Opening hours:**  
Mon to Fri: 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, Sat: 9:00 am – 6:00 pm,  
Sun: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm  
**Closed Public Holidays**  
**FOM guided tours:** Thurs 11:30 am, Sat & Sun 2:00 pm  
Please refer to STPI's website at [www.stpi.com.sg](http://www.stpi.com.sg) for STPI's public programmes and Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, French and special evening tours.



STPI is a dynamic creative workshop and contemporary art gallery based in Singapore. Established in 2002, STPI is a not-for-profit organisation committed to promoting artistic experimentation in the mediums of print and paper and has become one of the most cutting-edge destinations for contemporary art in Asia.

## Turning the Axis of the World (through 13 Sept)

Earth's axis – the invisible line around which our globe rotates – is assumed to be something fixed. In certain myths, this axis connects the earth with the spiritual realm, through sacred forms such as trees or mountains. The exhibition *Turning the Axis of the World* considers how the turning of the earth's axis suggests an upending of the natural order of things. Scientists have recently discovered that the earth's axial motion is affected by climate

change, bringing to the fore our tenuous relationship with the natural world and by extension, the cosmic balance. At the same time, a compulsion to turn the axis also suggests a desire to reset the world and open up new possibilities. Drawing from past residency artists at STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery, this exhibition blends the expression of these ideas – of a world 'out of joint' – inviting us to consider our responses and agency in these uncertain times.

**Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall**  
12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874  
Tel: 6256 7377  
[www.wanqingyuan.org.sg](http://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



Built in 1902, this double-storey villa was the nerve centre of Dr Sun Yat Sen's revolutionary movement in Southeast Asia. It re-opened to the public on 9 October 2011 and the revamped Memorial Hall pays tribute to the vital role played by Singapore and Nanyang in the 1911 Revolution. Focusing on the contributions of Dr. Sun Yat Sen's key supporters in Singapore, the refurbished museum sheds light on the lesser-known details of Singapore and Nanyang's involvement in the 1911 Revolution.

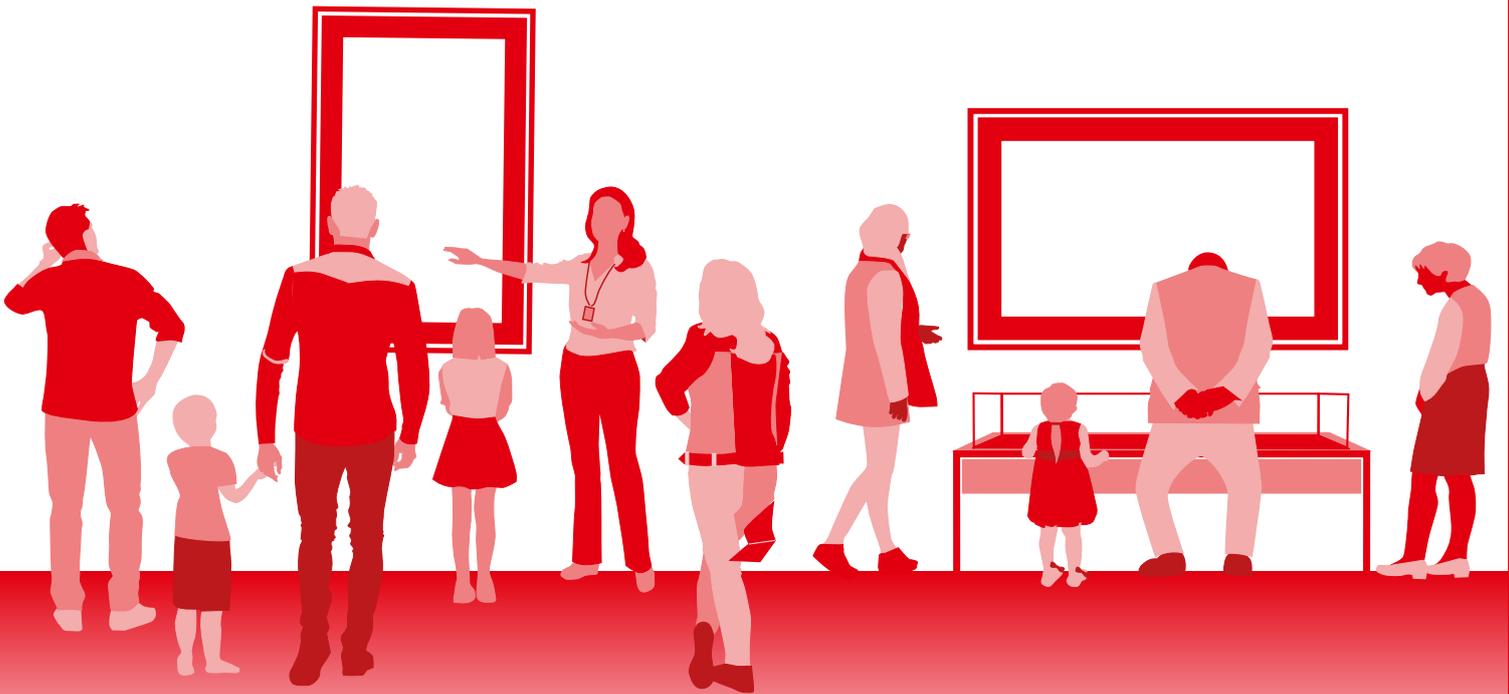
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for FOM members and one guest.*



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## 10 AM Monday 21 September



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