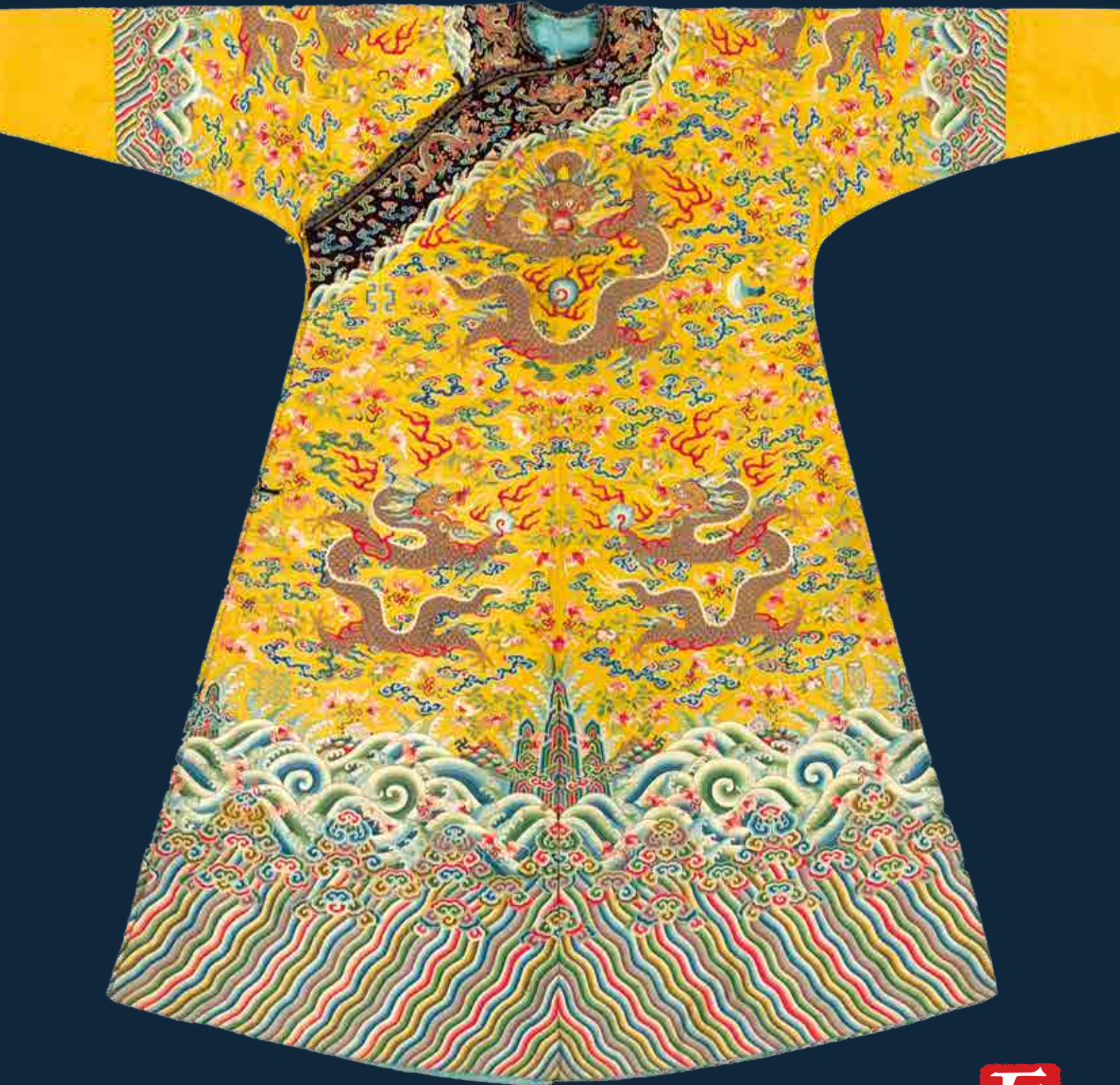


PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

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ISSUE III



The Yellow Issue



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ON THE COVER

A stunning Qing yellow dragon robe with the 12 imperial symbols from the Qianlong period (1735-1796), Chris Hall Collection. Photo courtesy of Chris Hall. Learn how yellow was used in ancient China and uncover the secrets of the dragon robe in "The Emperor's Old Clothes" on page 3.

- 01 **PRESIDENT'S BLOG**
- 02 **FROM THE EDITORS**

FEATURES

- 03 The Emperor's Old Clothes: *Discover the secrets of the yellow dragon robe*
- 09 Yellow Pride: *A look at the bright side of yellow*
- 13 The Colour of Sunshine and Urine: *Why yellow is not favoured in Europe*
- 16 Golden Tara of the Himalayas: *Homage to a favourite golden goddess*
- 17 Divinely Yellow: *A reflection on the spiritual aspects of yellow*
- 21 Dangers and Delights of Durian: *In praise of the yellow-fleshed king of fruits*
- 23 Covered in Gold: *In search of Burmese gold*
- 27 The Mystery of the Yellow Dress and its Matching Shirt: *A look at a power couple's twinned garments*
- 29 Gems From A Golden Isle: *Hybrid jewellery for a colourful colonial society*



17



23

NEWS

- 48 The ACM turns 25
- 49 **MUSEUM DIRECTORY AND EXHIBITIONS**
- COLLECTORS' CORNER**
- 51 The Keris Wore Yellow
- 52 **MONDAY MORNING LECTURES**

FOM ACTIVITIES

- 43 **BATIK & BLING:** Volunteer Appreciation Meet
- 45 New docents join the ranks
- 47 Explore Singapore!
- 48 Contact List



27

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President's Blog

Hello everyone!

As I write this blog, we have just received news that Singapore is well and truly opening up. There is jubilation across the island as we plan the socials and in-person catch-ups with friends and family on a much larger scale. The timing is great as summer break is around the corner for many of our members and travelling is so much easier now too. The health concerns, though still there, are not as worrying anymore.

I've been thinking about how FOM has "survived" the last two years.

FOM was formed when people came together for a cause, a shared interest; stayed united through lots of social interaction and activities. For docents, we were always out there in the museums, meeting visitors, bumping into each other, training and doing research together, working and laughing together.

Social interaction was the glue that kept us going.

In 2020, when we were faced with the reality that social interaction was to be eliminated from our lives, it was the camaraderie and dedication built up over the years that became the new glue. I am heartened by this and warmed by how we have aced the test of our friendship and resolve.

FOM will take a traditional "summer" break in July, when activities will take a short hiatus. But we will be gearing up again soon for the next season.

Below you will see a lovely banner for this year's Open Morning. It is some time off but we thought that it'll be good to give everyone a heads up – save the date! Open Morning, for those who may not be as familiar, is two events in one – it marks the start of a new season of our amazing Monday Morning Lectures or MMLs, and is also the day we put up a little carnival of sorts to share with members of the public what FOM is all about. It is slated to be an in-person event! So do share the information widely and bring your friends – we are always excited to welcome new members.

On another note, Heike Bredenkamp, co-editor in chief of *PASSAGE*, is relocating out of Singapore. We wish her all the very best and thank her for her contributions in the refresh project. We welcome Tim Clark who has stepped up to the role.

You may also have noticed that this issue has come out a little later than before and is thicker. That's because *PASSAGE* is transitioning to a quarterly publication, so that we can focus our efforts and resources into putting together an even better magazine, built upon a strong foundation of fifteen years.



Photo by Darlene Kasten.

Millie Phuah
FOM President
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Save the Date!

Monday 5 September 2022
10 AM – Open Morning
11 AM – Monday Morning Lecture

Details to follow ...

From the Editors

Welcome to our devotion to yellow. Why yellow? Last year's "Blue" issue was popular, so we felt that another colour might go down well. In many cultures, yellow represents hope, sunshine, happiness, and warmth. As the Covid gloom that has been hanging over us in the past two years slowly dissipates, what better way for *PASSAGE* to herald brighter days ahead than with an issue full of cheery yellow?

We hope you like the new look and style we have given *PASSAGE*. Our aim is to provide features that are enjoyable as well as informative to read, with bigger, high-quality pictures, livelier layouts and more engaging writing. By making each feature entertaining as well as educational, we hope to emulate what every good museum docent does. The trick is not to merely display knowledge, but to make it interesting to a broad readership. Certainly we are encouraged by the positive feedback we have received from our readers recently. And we are grateful to the contributors who have helped us.

Yellow was one of the first colours used in art (as seen in the Lascaux cave paintings from the Paleolithic Age) due to the abundance of yellow ochre pigment. Van Gogh was inspired by the blazing yellow sunshine of Provence in his darkest moments. In ancient China, imperial yellow was reserved for the emperor. In various spiritual traditions, yellow symbolises the light of the Divine. Ancient Egyptians painted their gods yellow so that it would resemble gold. To flaunt their wealth, Burmese kings sent letters inscribed on gem-studded gold plates to foreign counterparts.

Everyone loves gold, but yellow gets a mixed reaction. In the Middle Ages, yellow was the colour of discrimination in Europe. Even today, yellow can be associated with cowardice, betrayal, egoism, madness and pestilence. Scientists believe that yellow fever has plagued the world for at least 3,000 years!

Prejudice aside, yellow is also useful to us. The human eye processes yellow first, which explains why it is used on warning signs, safety vests and emergency vehicles. Yellow is 2.5 times more visible than red in peripheral vision. Divers like it because it is the most visible colour deep underwater. Unfortunately, it is rumoured that yellow also attracts sharks. This has earned it the nickname "yum yum yellow".

With that in mind, we hope this issue gives you an appetite for the colour!

Our next issue will focus on the theme of Health and Wellbeing. Write in to us if you'd like to pitch your story ideas.



Photo by Darlene Kasten.

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ABOUT FOM

Friends of the Museums Singapore (FOM) is a non-profit society that provides members with opportunities to learn, share and experience Asian art, history and culture through a myriad of activities organised by our volunteers.

As an FOM member, you will have the incredible opportunity to share your passion for museums with visitors by joining our docent training programmes that prepare volunteers to become guides and docents for Singapore's museums and heritage-related organisations.

You can also join a book club, attend an enlightening lecture series, participate in a charity event or immerse yourself in the world of Asian textiles. We even have a film club! Join a guided tour to explore Singapore or sign up for an overseas study tour for an unforgettable experience.

FOM members enjoy free access to NHB museums as well as discounts at selected retail outlets, theatres and restaurants along with a subscription to *PASSAGE* magazine.

Come and be a part of a truly vibrant, diverse community of like-minded people, form friendships and create memories that last a lifetime.

For more information, visit our website at www.fom.sg or contact the FOM Office.



The Emperor's



Qing yellow dragon robe with the 12 imperial symbols from the Qianlong period (1735-1796), Chris Hall Collection. On loan to the ACM. (Not currently on display.) Photo courtesy of Chris Hall.

Old Clothes

DAWN MARIE LEE REVEALS THE SECRETS OF THE YELLOW DRAGON ROBE

Vast palaces, powerful emperors, scheming eunuchs and jealous concubines. These are images of ancient China that have captured the imagination of historians and filmmakers alike.

But long after the passing of the Chinese emperors, their opulent hand-me-downs continue to dazzle and fascinate. Fashioned by armies of silk weavers and embroiderers, no icon instantly conveys imperial power like the yellow dragon robe.

MANY SHADES OF POWER

Yellow became associated with royalty in ancient China during the Zhou Dynasty when a system of etiquette was established to determine what colours people of different ranks in the imperial court could wear.

Centuries later, the Tang emperor Gaozhong decided that only he could wear reddish-yellow, which symbolised the sun. That shade came to be known as “Imperial Yellow” or *minghuang*.

In 1618, the Ming emperor Wanli passed a law ruling that common people and officials were forbidden to wear clothes or accessories in imperial yellow. It persisted for almost 300 years until the Chinese Revolution in 1912.

The use of yellow became stricter during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). A hierarchy of yellow shades was introduced to differentiate ranks within the imperial court. Apart from yellow, the emperor also wore other colours such as blue, red and white for different ceremonial rituals and outside of his official duties.

MAKING IMPERIAL YELLOW DYE

Making imperial yellow dye was a long and arduous process. In order to achieve the exact colour, Chinese foxglove roots had to be harvested at a precise time, only at the end of the eighth lunar month. They were pounded to a smooth paste.

Almost one kilogramme of paste was needed to dye a piece of silk approximately 4.6 square metres in size – barely enough to make a single dragon robe. Then the paste was mixed with a mordant of ashes from oak, mulberry, or beach wormwood trees. In addition, the silk went through two dye vats, and they had to be rust-proof.

Scholar Tree buds (*Sophora japonica*) later became the preferred ingredient for making imperial yellow dye because of superior colour fastness under exposure to the sun.



Delicate buds of the Scholar Tree (Sophora japonica) used to make imperial yellow dye.

DECODING THE DRAGON ROBE

At first glance, the Chinese imperial dragon robe appears to be so-named because of its prominent dragon designs. However, a closer look reveals an enigmatic system of motifs and features. In Chinese history, Qing dragon robes in particular were unrivalled in complexity.

RANK	COLOUR
Emperor, empress, empress dowager, and first rank consorts on formal occasions	Minghuang 明黄 (imperial yellow)
Heir apparent	Xinghuang 杏黄 (apricot yellow, almost an orange shade)
Emperor's sons	Jinhuang 金黄 (golden yellow)
Other members of the imperial family including concubines	Xiang se 香色 (incense colour, a slightly greenish yellow)
	Jiu xiang se 九香色 (plum brown)
Lower ranking nobles and all others	Qing se 青色* (cyan)
	Lan se 蓝色 (deep blue)

**In ancient China, 青 also stood for extremely dark green (almost black)*



The emperor is depicted wearing a yellow dragon robe for a ritual ploughing ceremony to inaugurate the agricultural year. He is seen guiding a yellow ox-drawn plough and was required to turn three furrows on a sacred field festooned for the occasion. Ink on silk scroll. Collection of the Musée Guimet, Paris.

The stunning robe on our cover is from the reign of Qianlong (1735-1796) and was designated for an emperor as it features all 12 symbols of imperial power. It was on display at the ACM from December 2005 to April 2006 in *Power Dressing*, an exhibition of textiles from the Chris Hall Collection. It is a *kesi* robe with the motifs carefully woven in to the silk, not embroidered.

A robe like this is termed *long pao* (dragon robe) in an important illustrated catalogue commissioned by Qianlong in 1759 to govern the use of imperial ritual wear. The right to wear the dragon robe, and its accessories, was conferred by a complex system of rank and entitlement listed in this catalogue. Dragon robes were worn by the emperor for ritual ceremonies including a ploughing ceremony to inaugurate an agricultural year.

The tapered sleeves with horse-hoof cuffs are a nod to the Manchu horse riding heritage of the Qing rulers. Vents on the front, back, and sides indicate that this robe was worn by a man who had the rank of emperor, crown prince, first or second-degree prince. Lower ranking Chinese nobles and officials were permitted only two slits on their robes on the front and back.



A dragon robe from the Kangxi period (1662-1722), Collection of the ACM (not currently on display). This robe features nine dragons amidst stylised clouds, with motifs of waves and mountains at the hem. Photo courtesy of the ACM.

Early Qing dragon robes were often made of one colour such as the one in the ACM collection. However, from the 1720s, court robes could be made up of contrasting fabrics, as is the case of the dragon robe from the Chris Hall Collection with the black silk trim around the collar, chest flap and cuffs.

The collar and cuffs feature dragons amid clouds and waves - a repetition of the main motifs on the robe.

CLUES IN THE CLAWS

Another important clue in decoding a dragon robe is in the claws of the dragons. Dragons with five-claws called *long* were used exclusively for the robes and badges of the emperor, crown prince and first and second rank princes.

A portrait of the Qing emperor, Qianlong, in ceremonial armour on horseback (1758) painted by Italian missionary painter Giuseppe Castiglione. Although Italian painters were masters of chiaroscuro, the Chinese emperors disliked the technique as they felt it made a painting look "dirty". Here, the lack of shadows makes it appear like the figure is floating. Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



They outranked the four-clawed *mang* dragon that was assigned to the emperor's grandsons and imperial princes of the third rank down to nobles of the seventh rank.

The robe's overall design, which includes various elements of the universe, symbolises the emperor's power. Nine dragons chasing flaming pearls amid the clouds, soaring above mountains and waves symbolise the emperor as Ruler of the Universe. The ninth dragon is hidden from view on an inside front flap. Bat and peach motifs count as blessings of good fortune and longevity for the emperor.

The 12 Symbols of Imperial Power

Perhaps the most mysterious yet revealing motifs on the robe are the 12 Symbols of Ancient Imperial Authority that allude to an emperor's power. The use of the 12 symbols dates back to the Zhou Dynasty, but was rejected by Qianlong's Manchu ancestors when they seized control of China. Qianlong reintroduced the use of the 12 symbols, and in 1766 decreed that only the emperor could wear a dragon robe with all 12 symbols.

ON THE SHOULDERS



The Sun

Depicted with a three-legged red bird. It was this bird that heralded the dawn. Three was a prime symbol of male potency in Chinese cosmology.



The Moon

Depicted with a hare pounding the elixir of immortality.

ON THE FRONT

Constellation

(at the neck)
Represented by three stars.

Fu symbol

(chest level, on the left)
Represents good and evil as opposites and the emperor's power to distinguish between the two.

Axe head

(chest level, on the right)
Represents the emperor's power over life and death.

Aquatic grass

(knee level, on the left)
Represents the water element.

Ancestral libation cups

(knee level, on the right)
Represents the metal element.

AT THE BACK

Mountains

(at the neck)
Represents the earth and stability.

Pair of Dragons

(chest level, on the left)
Represent the beasts of the natural world.

Pheasant

(chest level, on the right)
Represents birds of the natural world.

Flames

(knee level, on the left)
Represents the fire element.

Millet

(knee level, on the right)
Represents the wood element.

THE EMPEROR OF LASTING EMINENCE

While the yellow dragon robe is fascinating, the life of the emperor who possibly wore it is no less intriguing. Qianlong was the Kangxi emperor's favourite grandson and the longest reigning monarch in Chinese history after his grandfather.

His reign is noted for extraordinary imperial splendour, remarkable achievements in literature and art, and vigorous expansion of the Chinese frontiers to the west and the south.

Like Kangxi, Qianlong had an enormous interest in the fields of science, technology and art and looked to the West for inspiration. He corresponded with his contemporary, Louis XV of France and was a collector of French clocks. He expanded the Forbidden City and included European style architectural features in the Palace of Delights and Harmony which the French Jesuits declared 'bore great comparison with the Chateau of Versailles and Saint Cloud'.

Qianlong continued Kangxi's practice of inviting European Jesuits to serve in the imperial court. These men were specialists in mathematics, science, architecture, calendrics, topography as well as different artistic fields such as painting, print-making, and enamelling.

While their skills were welcomed at court, their attempts to spread Christianity were not. Qianlong rarely pardoned missionaries who were caught trying to convert the locals, so they were mostly executed for such a crime.



A portrait of the Emperor Qianlong in court dress, 1736, by Jesuit missionary painter Giuseppe Castiglione. Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Like his grandfather, Qianlong displayed an openness to new ideas and a desire to learn from the Jesuits. He was also particularly influenced by an unlikely friendship he had formed in childhood with a talented Italian Jesuit painter named Giuseppe Castiglione. He came to China on Kangxi's request in 1715 when Qianlong was just four years old.

THE MISSIONARY AND THE EMPEROR

Castiglione was born in Milan in 1688 to a wealthy family and was educated at home with a private tutor as was the custom. His extraordinary talent in art blossomed in his youth and he entered the Society of Jesus at the age of 19.

He was never ordained as a priest but served as a lay brother, observing the vows of humility and poverty. When Kangxi sought to employ European Jesuits, Castiglione was identified by the Order as a promising painter and was sent to China.

His life in China was recorded posthumously in his *Memoria* (Memoirs) written by an unknown member of his Order. It is recorded that Kangxi was so eager to meet him that he commanded Castiglione to appear in court as soon as he arrived in Beijing, even before he could meet any of his fellow Jesuits.

On arrival, he was given a silk scroll and was asked to paint a bird while the emperor watched. The emperor was suitably impressed, and Castiglione was immediately assigned to the Imperial Enamel workshop.

Castiglione had exceptional skill because when put to the emperor's test, he could paint effortlessly on silk. At that time, most European paintings were done with oil paints on canvas where mistakes could be easily corrected. Whereas a stray brush stroke on silk is impossible to remove.

Soon, Castiglione took on a new Chinese name - Lang Shi'ning, which means "Peace of the World". Unlike his Jesuit artistic predecessors, Castiglione married the best of both European and Chinese techniques to create a new style.



A depiction of Giuseppe Castiglione in Qing court robes. Artist unknown.



Detail from One Hundred Horses in a Landscape. Ink on silk scroll, 1728. At almost eight metres long, it is one of Giuseppe Castiglione's most magnificent works. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

His *xianfa* (line method) school of painting quickly became the favoured style of Emperor Kangxi. Notably, he omitted the use of strong *chiaroscuro* (the contrast of light and shadow) that Italian painters were renowned for. The Chinese emperors disliked this technique and saw the shading as "dirt".

Castiglione was tasked to paint many imperial portraits including that of the emperor, empress and their royal household, as well as documenting their favourite horses, military successes and landscapes. His paintings were prized by the three generations of emperors he served.

One of his masterpieces is *One Hundred Horses in a Landscape*, a silk painting almost eight metres long. Most of his surviving works are housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing and the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

HUMBLE FRIAR WINS EMPEROR'S HEART

Castiglione served three Qing emperors, but achieved his greatest fame during Qianlong's reign. Qianlong loved him like a member of his own family, and was in particular, greatly moved by his humility. Their friendship is well documented in Castiglione's *Memoria*:

"Since he was a child, Qianlong was an admirer of Castiglione and developed a great love and filial affection for him. As soon as he became Emperor, he could not stand the fact that the worthy old man did not have any honours, so he decreed that he would enter the order of Mandarins. As the news rapidly spread all over the city, many people started to congratulate Castiglione openly on what they thought was a settled fact. But the virtuous old man abhorred these kinds of honours, which are alien to our (Jesuit) Society and incompatible with his vows of humility. He prayed to God with many tears to show him a way to avoid them and not offend the emperor."

Stunningly, when Qianlong received news of how it pained Castiglione, he recalled the decree, not wanting to afflict the very person he sought to gratify. This showed how much affection Qianlong had for the old friar.

The emperor protected and indulged Castiglione during a time when it was increasingly dangerous to be a Christian in China. It is said that on one occasion, Castiglione personally pleaded for the lives of two Jesuits who were arrested for proselytising and marked for execution. Qianlong pardoned them out of respect for Castiglione but warned him that it was an exception.

Another entry in the *Memoria* states: *"The Emperor cared for Castiglione's health and comfort with the same solicitude he would have shown for a member of his family and used to send him his doctors and remedies from the Imperial Pharmacy."*

Qianlong elevated Castiglione to official court painter in 1736. In 1747 he was put in charge of the design and construction of Western-style pavilions in the Old Summer Palace. The site included complex gardens, aviaries, a maze, and perspective paintings organised as an outdoor theatrical stage, as well as fountains and waterworks.

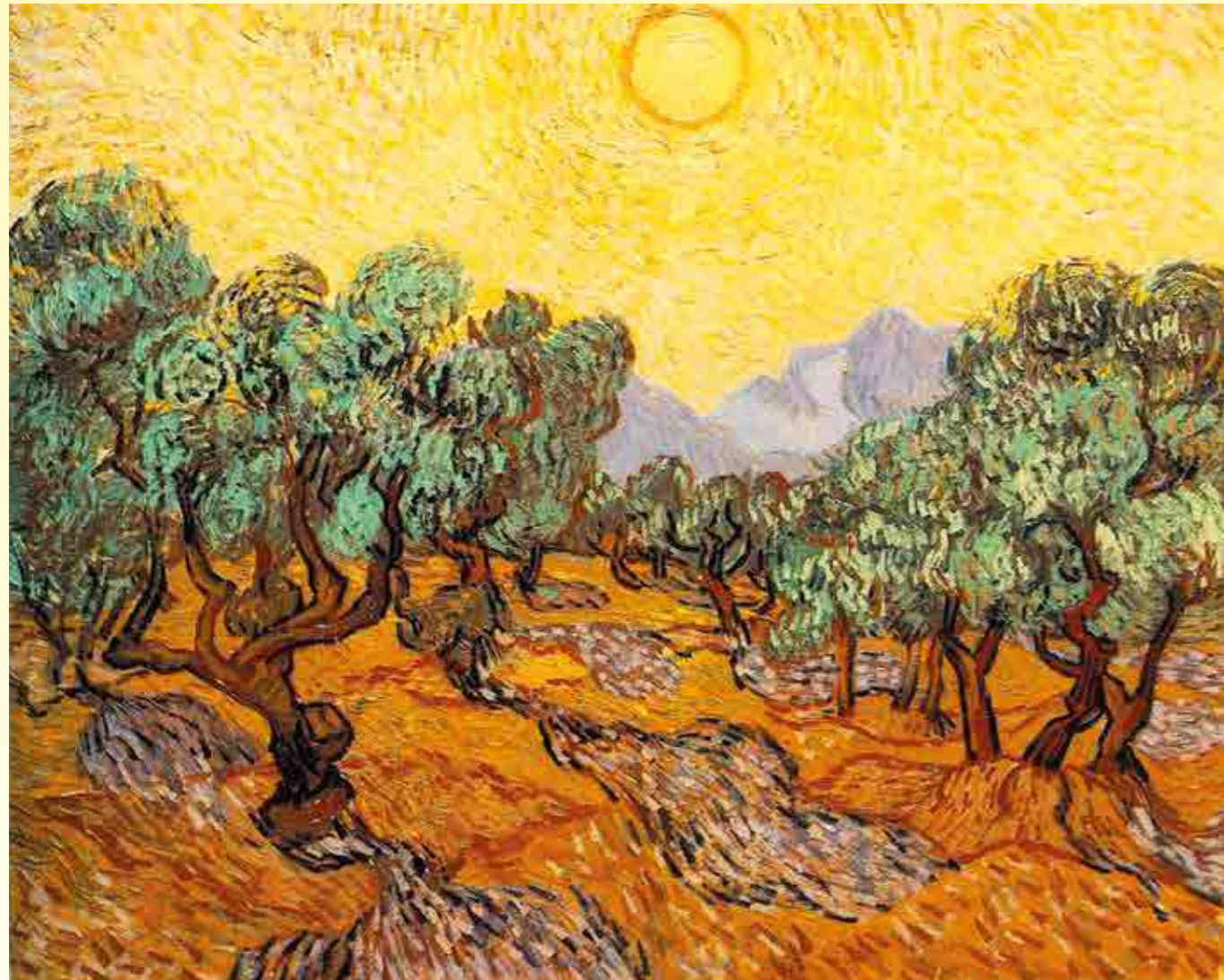
Sadly, the Old Summer Palace and all of Castiglione's beautiful work there was razed, ironically, by Anglo-French troops during the Second Opium War in the 1860s.

In 1748, Qianlong appointed Castiglione as Administrator of the imperial parks and vice-president of the six boards, the highest rank ever attained by a Jesuit.

Castiglione died in Beijing in 1766, 51 years after he arrived in China. Qianlong mourned his death, personally writing a decree that was inscribed on Castiglione's tombstone that described him as "my diligent and prudent friend". Such a great honour for the emperor in the dragon robe to the friar in a humble cassock. 🇨🇳

DAWN MARIE LEE is Co-Editor-in-Chief of *PASSAGE* and a docent at the NUS Baba House. When she visited the Forbidden City, she was fascinated that the roofs of all 980 buildings were designed so that birds cannot land on them.

Yellow Pride



Olive Trees by Vincent Van Gogh, 1889. Painted eight months before he committed suicide in 1890. Courtesy of Minneapolis Museum of Art.

PASSAGE EDITORS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF YELLOW

Surely no other artist can be credited with painting more intensely and more exuberantly with the colour yellow than Van Gogh. The piercing yellow moon and stars in the dark sky of his painting *The Starry Night* can be viewed as a metaphor of his life. The agonies of depression he was prone to were evidently relieved by the ecstasy he experienced when painting. He was inspired to produce 15 paintings of the olive trees that surrounded the asylum in Provence where he stayed. His tortured soul no doubt found expression in the gnarled shapes of the olive trees, bathed in the heavenly light of a blazing yellow sky.



King Louis XIV of France, *Le Roi Soleil (The Sun King)* dressed as Apollo, 1653. Collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris



Qing dynasty Emperor Kangxi in court dress. Early 18th century. The Palace Museum, Beijing. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Yellow hasn't always been a popular colour, though it has increasingly become more of a source of pride than prejudice. In the Far East it escaped the negative associations that it suffered in Europe. And it could be supposed that the fashion for chinoiserie and orientalism might have heightened its appeal.

GOLDEN RULERS IN A GOLDEN AGE

One of the fashion icons of the 17th century was King Louis XIV of France. He began losing his hair in his teens and is credited with starting the fashion of wearing wigs, which spread across Europe and lasted for two centuries. Like his contemporary, the Qing Emperor Kangxi of China, he too was fond of wearing golden yellow. Though for different reasons.

King Louis portrayed himself as the Sun King and dressed in yellow outfits to impersonate the Greek sun god Apollo. Whereas Emperor Kangxi dressed in imperial yellow to proclaim his authority as the earthly link between the three worlds: Earth, Heaven and the Underworld of the ancestors. The Earth's symbolic colour is yellow, taken from the plains

of yellow loess that cover much of Northern China, especially in the Yellow River valley.

Although they never met, King Louis (1638-1715) and Emperor Kangxi (1662-1722) had much in common. They both succeeded to their thrones as children and ruled their respective countries during their golden ages. They were both patrons of the arts and had magnificent palaces: Louis dreamed up Versailles and Kangxi expanded the Forbidden City.

Through intermediaries who were Jesuit missionaries, they exchanged correspondence and gifts. The Chinese Emperor was delighted with the French scientific instruments he received, as was the French King with his collection of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain.

WHEN FASHION FAVOURS YELLOW

Yellow porcelain was known to be favoured by the Chinese Imperial family. In fact, its production was restricted and reserved for those of noble rank, adding exclusivity to its golden allure.

“Yellow is capable of charming God”



Yellow porcelain in the Percival David Collection at the British Museum, London. Photo by Millie Johnson.

Notice the yellow plate in the ceramics gallery on the third floor of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). This might have been produced for the imperial Chinese nobility for the purpose of making offerings to the Earth deity. Monochrome blue glazed vessels were for altars dedicated to Heaven, red was for the Sun, while yellow was for the Earth. The rich yellow glaze is really an iron oxide enamel and was produced during the Zhengde period of the Ming dynasty (1505-1521). The Percival David Collection in the British Museum includes an impressive selection of this imperial yellow porcelain from the late Ming to the early Qing dynasties.

WHEN THE IMITATED BECOMES THE IMITATOR

It is interesting to note that when the European factories learned how to produce porcelain, the continuing craze for chinoiserie meant that much of it was still made to appear Chinese. Initially, porcelain made in Europe needed to look Chinese to be considered *à la mode* and truly desirable.

The early 18th century Meissen yellow tureen, with painted Chinese figures, is a good example. It proudly bears the Meissen (crossed swords) mark, so it is not attempting to deceive. Whereas the same cannot be said for the yellow cups in the ACM's Trade Gallery, which were made in China towards the end of the 18th century.



Ming dynasty yellow porcelain dish (1505-1521). ACM collection. Photo by Tim Clark.

Not only do they depict European figures, but they display the fake Meissen mark on their bases, pretending that they were made in Germany in the 1720s. The mark they fraudulently display is very rare and pre-dates the crossed swords usually indicative of Meissen. The monogram “AR” stands for Augustus Rex, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony (1670-1733) during whose reign Europe's first porcelain factory was founded near Dresden.

It seems to herald a turning point in China's long history of supremacy in ceramics when Chinese potters stooped to producing porcelain that pretended to be German. This might prompt some people to suggest that, by the end of the 18th century, the source of the finest porcelain and the greatest innovations in ceramics had shifted from China to Europe.



Meissen porcelain tureen, 1725-30, sold at Sotheby's for US\$37,800 in 2021.



Late 18th century porcelain cup and saucer. Made in China to masquerade as German-made Meissen. Photo by Tim Clark.



ROYAL BLUE, BUT WHY NOT ROYAL YELLOW?

Yellow walls can add a dash of sunshine to a dull room. And yellow garments make a striking statement, (though buttercup yellow might not suit a shrinking violet). In fact, a deep yellow is supposed to look best against darker skin tones. But that doesn't discourage Queen Elizabeth from frequently wearing even the brightest of yellows.

Predictably, her favourite colour turns out to be blue, which according to Vogue she has worn at 29 per cent of her engagements. Nevertheless, she seems to love all bright colours, including various shades of yellow. In 2019, Queen Elizabeth even wore yellow to attend a church service. Perhaps she would agree with Van Gogh who claimed that “Yellow is capable of charming God”. 🇳🇵

Queen Elizabeth attending a service at St Magdalene Church, on her Sandringham estate. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

The Colour of Sunshine and Urine

CAROLINE CARFANTAN QUESTIONS WHY YELLOW IS, FOR SOME, THE LEAST FAVOURITE COLOUR IN EUROPE



Synagoga by Konrad Witz, 1435. Courtesy of Art Museum Basel.

Yellow is a colour with a long history. In the Paleolithic period, an ochre yellow pigment, derived from clay, was used in the wall paintings of the French Chauvet caves (32,000-30,000 BCE) or the Lascaux ones (21,000-21,500 BCE). But these shades have been altered by time. Nor, will we ever see them in the same light as the onlookers of those times. They gazed at them in the light of burning torches, without an overload of coloured images in the back of their minds.



Palaeolithic cave paintings from the Lascaux caves ©Dan Courtier.

In the antiquity, yellow had a split personality. It had positive attributes when associated with gold, the sun or blond hair. But those were lost in a more material, daily context such as garments. In Rome, yellow dyed cloth was only worn by women or effeminate men. Roman citizens, and free men, wore mostly white togas dusted with chalk to render them as white as possible.

Yellow and the Church

The Bible and the Church are quite mute when it comes to colours. None of their protagonists are described wearing such or such a tone. When in the 4th century the Church started with the construct of a symbolic colour system that extended well into the early Middle Ages, yellow was practically absent. According to the historian François Jacquesson, red, white, and black covered 95 per cent of the biblical palette. Yellow was also not present when Cardinal Lotario, the future Pope Innocent III, wrote his treatise in 1195 laying down a chromatic code associating colours with symbols. However, gold was everywhere, completing the liturgical palette of red, white, black, and green.

Yellow the Colour of Discrimination

Yellow is the colour of our bile and urine. (Though, to its credit, the urine of cows fed on mango leaves is a valued source of dye for textiles in India.) It is also the colour of bad teeth and illnesses such as jaundice. When a ship flies a yellow “Q” flag it indicates that it is in quarantine and should be avoided. Even paper over time turns yellow - a first sign of decay. So, no wonder that in allegorical poetry in

the Middle Ages yellow was the visualisation of early decline. And as Goethe (1749-1832) wrote, “Yellow is a gay, soft and joyous colour, but in poor light it becomes quickly unpleasant, and the slightest mixing makes it dirty, ugly and uninteresting.”¹

Yellow has sinister associations. It became the colour of envy, deceit, cowardice and treachery. In the late 13th century texts and images started attributing colours to the seven deadly sins, of which yellow represented envy. Yellow also became part of the visual grammar of liturgical paintings. To identify Judas Iscariot, artists at the time could pick from among the following attributes to single him out: the missing halo, the purse containing the price of his betrayal, his red hair or beard, the kiss in the olive garden, or his yellow robe. But none of these were standards or mandates, and not every figure wearing a yellow garment can be equated with Judas.

However, from the Middle Ages and beyond, yellow became the colour associated with Judaism. In the 13th century England, Germany and Italy, this colour marker translated also into the iconography of the Synagoga (the female portrayal of Jewish faith in medieval Christian art). In several paintings the colour chosen for her robe was yellow. It is also the period where dress



(top) The Procuress by Johannes Vermeer, 1656. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. Image from Wikimedia Commons.



(left) The Arrest of Christ (Kiss of Judas) by Giotto di Bondone, 1306. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

insignias for Jews, often yellow, were mandated. This may also account for the selection of yellow for the star the Nazis obliged Jews to wear.

Yellow became an iconographical code for discrimination of all kinds. In Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* published in 1862, the hero, Jean Valjean had to show his yellow identity card after his release from prison. The card's colour immediately identified him as an ex-convict, turning him into an outcast.

Similarly in 19th century Russia, prostitutes were obliged to carry a yellow passport, which revealed their trade and betrayed their social position. Since the 14th century, yellow and at times red, had been the colour of prostitution in Europe. "These were colours that could be seen and that were imposed by authorities to mark a brothel (a sign or lantern) or a professional prostitute (a dress or article of clothing). These were also the colours generally chosen by painters to portray bought love (Vermeer, Toulouse-Lautrec, Kupka)."²



Faux Meissen cups and saucers. Photo courtesy of the ACM.

When Yellow Regains some Popularity

In the 17th century fashion changed when products from the East India trade started to appear in the market and upper-class households. China, chinoiserie real or fake became fashionable, and as China was associated with yellow, the popularity of yellow increased. Meissen produced porcelain covered with yellow enamel to cater for the fashion for chinoiserie. And it is ironic that the Chinese then produced teacups to imitate Meissen, including faking the Meissen mark, as seen in the ACM collection.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806) a precursor of the impressionists, was known as the rococo painter of yellow. His yellow is often referred to as *jaune vie*. It is described as lively and bright, as one can see in his famous painting *La Liseuse* (Young Girl Reading, or The Reader).

Van Gogh could not paint without yellow once he had discovered the light of the South of France. But his yellow is not the yellow we see today. Outdoor painters at the time had mostly two yellows "in metal tubes" at their disposal: chrome yellow and cadmium yellow. The former was about a quarter of the price of the latter. As Van Gogh was always broke, he could only afford the "cheap" version. But chrome yellow was a less stable colour as time would tell. So, under the influence of UV-light and humidity, the famous Sunflower paintings (1888 and 1889) have lost their original vivacity and faded over time into a brown-beige.

And what about today? How much yellow is there in Western daily life? Be it yellow walls, or yellow garments? There may be a touch of yellow every now and then, but I guess the only person whose complete canary yellow outfit would mostly go uncommented would be the Queen of England, Elizabeth II. In Western Europe, yellow is still not a favourite. Since the beginning of the 20th century, all colour rankings have come up with the same result. "Whether it is in 1890, 1930, 1970 or 2010, blue always comes first by a wide margin, yellow always decidedly last."³



Young Girl Reading by Jean Honoré Fragonard, 1769. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

CAROLINE CARFANTAN is an FOM docent whose article would not have been possible without the support of fellow docent Ariane Nabarro.

FEATURE

Golden Tara of the Himalayas

PIA RAMPAL TRANSPORTS US TO THE HIGH HIMALAYAS TO MEET HER FAVOURITE GODDESS

*"Homage to you, Tara, whose face is like
One hundred full autumn moons gathered together,
Blazing with the expanded light
Of a thousand stars assembled."*

FROM THE "PRAISES TO THE TWENTY-ONE TARAS"

Tara, the supreme Buddhist Saviour Goddess is deeply revered in the lands of the snow, Nepal and Tibet. Her name means "star" in Sanskrit and derives from the verb "taar" meaning to cross, just as a golden star crosses the dark indigo expanse of the night sky.

Like the star, Tara guides her devotees over the troubled waters of life to the other shore of spiritual liberation. In the most popular myth of her origin, Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, was moved to tears by the infinite suffering of living beings. From the tears of his compassion, a lotus blossomed on a lake, Tara emerged from the lotus and promised to share his mission to alleviate suffering.

In a seminal exhibition, *Devi Great Goddess* at the Smithsonian, this majestic standing Tara from 14th century Nepal, gilded in gold, shone like a jewel. She is an outstanding example of the golden Taras transformed as if by magical alchemy from metal to sacred image by the Newari artists of the Kathmandu valley.

Tara stands gracefully with a gentle sway of her hips. She is richly dressed and ornamented, wearing an intricately patterned garment, elaborate gem-encrusted crown with ribbons flying behind her ears. Her elongated youthful body, soft caring face and sinuous blue lotus attached to her shoulder are in the distinctive elegant Newari style.

Tara's right thumb and index finger form a circle in the *vitarka mudra* gesture of discussion. Her left hand in the *varada mudra* gesture of giving, holds an object, sometimes seen as a jewel representing divine compassion that she offers devotees.

GOLDEN GODDESS

Tara's divinity is enhanced with lavish gold gilding over a copper sculpture. Gold has been described as spiritually enthralling. It never tarnishes and is the most sacred and precious material. In Buddhism any other colour can be replaced by gold. Expenditure towards such luxurious gold gilding shows the patron's immense devotion to the goddess and desire for great merit.

Look closely, the ritually painted crushed blue lapis lazuli for the colour of her hair and an overlay of painted 'cold gold' on her face and neck indicate that while made in Nepal, she was worshipped in Tibet. In Tibetan Buddhism it continues to be customary to paint the faces of Buddhist images in 'cold gold' where very fine gold dust is mixed with a binder.

Golden sculptures of Tara are still made by Newari artists in the Kathmandu valley with consummate skill. Richard Gombrich, an authority on Buddhism, explains his view of the purpose of sacred Tara sculpture, "Seeing these beautiful and inspiring images has precisely that function - inspiration; you see this lovely figure of compassion and that can make you improve your mind, you can improve psychologically, you can become more compassionate, more like a Buddha, more like Tara".

PIA RAMPAL is an ACM docent, ad person and SOAS Asian Art alumni. This article is dedicated to her iconic mother, Tara Sinha, who inspired so many to reach up and touch a golden star.



Tara, gilded copper encrusted with gems, 14th century Nepal. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Divinely Yellow

DARLENE KASTEN REFLECTS ON THE SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF YELLOW

All photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum unless otherwise stated.

Yellow gold, yellow sun, yellow fire, it stands to reason that a colour associated with the light of wisdom, the radiance of the sun, and the eternal nature of gold would play a significant role in religious symbolism. And it does, in mythologies, faiths, and beliefs found across the world from the dawn of history to today.

*“And God said,
Let there be light.”*

GENESIS 1:3

According to Genesis, the first book in the Hebrew Torah and the Christian Bible’s Old Testament, God’s first act of creation was bringing light to the formless void and darkness covering the face of the deep, and declaring it “good”.

Light is used to represent divinity and wisdom in Christian art, and the colour that most often appears is golden yellow. As the word of God, holy books such as the Christian Bible and Muslim Quran are often illuminated or decorated with yellow gold.

Christians believe it was the light from an extremely bright star that led the Magi to find the birthplace of the baby Jesus. Jesus declared his divinity as “the light of the world” and compared his followers to light as well as commanding them to let their light shine before others. Light dispels darkness, the metaphor for ignorance.

The Arabic word *nūr* meaning “fire” may refer to the “Light of God” as well. In the Quran, *nūr* is a source of illumination against a state of darkness, or ignorance, and Allah is the source of all light, whether physical or metaphorical. The word *nūr*, or its derivatives, occurs forty-nine times in the Quran. *Al-nur* is often used in combination with *zulumat* (darkness) in describing movement from darkness into light – symbolically from ignorance into faith.

Candles and lamps are used in the religious ceremonies of many faiths, and festivals of light abound in religious celebration too. The word *Deepavali*, the Hindu festival of lights, itself translates to “a row of lights” and is conjugation of *dipa* meaning “lamp” or “light,” and *avali* meaning “row”, referencing the tradition of lighting lamps in the evening of the festival. The festival is largely



The Prophet Muhammed preaching at the mosque in Medina, before his son-in-law Ali and his grandsons Hassan and Hussein. The holy family is distinguished by haloes of golden flames radiating from their heads.

seen to symbolise the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness, and knowledge over ignorance and is also celebrated by Jains, Sikhs and some Buddhists.

Judaism celebrates its own festival of lights called Hanukkah, the Hebrew word for “dedication”. Hanukkah commemorates the recovery of Jerusalem at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt against the Hellenic Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BCE. After the victorious Jews entered the Second Temple to rededicate it, they found only one jar of pure oil, enough to be lit for only a single day. Yet miraculously the oil lasted for eight days. Today Hanukkah is observed among Jews with the yellow candlelight of the menorah, a nine-branched candelabrum that includes

“Of Lights I am the radiant Sun.”

BHAGAVAD GITA 10.21, LORD KRISHNA

a candle for each day the oil burned, plus a “servant candle” that is used to light the others.

Early man recognised the warmth and life-giving energy of the yellow sun and equated it with divinity. Ra, one of the oldest deities in the Egyptian pantheon, was the sun god of ancient Egypt associated with the primal life force.

The ancient Celts who spread over much of Europe from about 3000 BCE onwards had Lugh, the god of light. He is the only deity to appear throughout the Celtic world.

Norse mythology had a god of light, Balder; a goddess of gold, Freya; and a goddess of the sun, Sol. Sol drove a sun chariot as did the sun god of Greek mythology, Apollo. The Roman sun god was Sol Invictus who was of supreme importance in Rome until the 4th century CE when Emperor Constantine abandoned him in favour of Christianity.

Many of the Greek and Roman solar deities were depicted in art with golden yellow crowns or circles of light surrounding their heads, which led to haloes in Christian as well as in Gandharan Buddhist art. The latter more likely influenced Islam’s use of fire as a halo for the prophet Muhammad and his family too.

The Vedic religion in India had Agni, the god of fire and Surya, the sun god, both of whom made the transition into the Hindu pantheon of gods without losing their importance. Mahavira, a contemporary of the Buddha, is the 24th *tirthankara* or teacher in Jainism. He had two mothers who both experienced 14 prophetic dreams before his birth and the sun is the symbol of one of their dreams. In Buddhist cosmology, the bodhisattva of the sun is known as *Sūryaprabha* (“having the light of the sun”). The colour of the sun or fire stands for knowledge, enlightenment, purity, happiness, and freedom. That is why the Buddha in the Theravada practice often has a flame on top of his *ushmisha* or wisdom bump.

Although not a ritual in Islam, the Muslim Mughal emperor Akbar offered prayers at sunrise and sunset when he recited many honorific names of the sun. Representations



This is a grandly crowned and haloed image of the Vedic sun god, Surya.

of Akbar worshipping the sun reflect on his curiosity about other religions, including Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Christianity, an interest which culminated in his syncretic thesis *Din-i-Ilahi* (Divine Faith).

Fire generally represented the spark of life and rebirth, the cosmic force of creation. Zoroastrians believe that fire represents God’s light or wisdom. As an agent of ritual purity, the “burning of fire” is a key element in Zoroastrianism, one of the world’s oldest active religions. It traces its origins back to the 3rd millennium BCE to ancient Iran and Central Asia and to the prophet Zoroaster. Its followers include the Indian Parsis who migrated from Persia to India in the 10th century CE. The name Parsis derives from “Persians” with Persia being the ancient name for Iran.

Fire is also viewed by Christians and Jews as being a symbol of divinity. Fire represents the presence of God and how God refines us. Fire illuminates, warms, refines, purifies, and can change a material from one form to another. God often appeared as fire whether it was as a burning bush to speak to Moses or as tongues of fire to represent the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.



Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) worshipping the sun.

Gold is tested with fire, and the believer is tested with trials."

IMAM ALI (AS)



A fire chalice used to celebrate Nowruz, the Zoroastrian New Year's day and first day of the Khorshidi (solar) year. Photo courtesy of the Parsi Zoroastrian Association of Southeast Asia (PZAS).

The use of gold spans back centuries and touches almost every known belief system. Because gold has such a brilliant colour and doesn't tarnish or corrode, it was a symbol for immortality and power in many ancient cultures.

Ancient Egyptians believed that gold was symbolic of the flesh of the gods, which led them to use gold in funeral rituals. Many tombs of pharaohs contained lavish gold decorations and offerings, including within the sarcophagi that encased mummies.

Gold was correlated to solar deities in the Americas and was used for religious and decorative purposes. The Mesoamerican Aztecs and Mayans built large temples that were adorned with golden coins and statues and used gold for religious and funeral rites. The pre-Columbian Incas were known to build temples dedicated to the sun, filled with golden decor and objects that were worn during sacred rituals such as masks and sun disks. It was in this region that the legend of El Dorado rose, due to a ritual in which future kings were covered in powdered gold during coronation ceremonies.

Gold is an integral part of religious ceremonies in India. Whether Hinduism, Sikhism, or Jainism, gold is prominent across all major religions in the country. In Hinduism, the colour gold relates to learning, meditation, and self-guided improvement. Hindu idols are often depicted with gold haloes. This speaks their boundless wisdom and virtue.

Gold is the colour of knowledge and learning, happiness and peace. Lord Vishnu, Lord Krishna and Ganesha are traditionally shown wearing yellow, and it is believed that wearing yellow wards off evil spirits.

Once regarded as the forbidden material of false idols, the use of gold in Christian worship became popular in Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Used heavily in religious settings, golden yellow is synonymous with divinity and eternal power. This majestic hue reminds Christians of the strength and omnipresence of God. Christian churches and religious artefacts became decorated with gold, along with the clothing



Gold headdress of a Nias priestess.



Gilded bronze figure of a Sukhothai style Buddha with a tall flame finial, calling the earth goddess to witness his enlightenment.

and accessories of Roman Catholic hierarchy. After the Protestant Reformation the use of gold outside the Catholic and Orthodox religions in Europe lost its lustre once again.

In east Asia, from around 1100 BCE, gold became a common material in elaborate temple decorations. The Forbidden City in Beijing is one of the most well-known examples, which features golden furniture, ornaments, draperies, and accessories. Japan is also home to temples that are decorated in gold such as *Kinkakuji* or Golden Pavilion, a Zen temple in northern Kyoto in which the top two floors are completely covered in gold leaf.

Pasting gold leaf onto statues at pagodas is one way to honour the Buddha's teachings in Sri Lanka and parts of mainland Southeast Asia. Gilding such figures is, according to practitioners of Buddhism, "an act of loving kindness" and a path to "transfer good merits." Gold in Buddhism signifies the sun: a flame of purity, knowledge, and enlightenment. Yellow gold – the colour or the metal itself – is closely associated with wealth and nobility in traditional Southeast Asian island societies. Even more than an indication of rank on Nias, the remote islands off the southern coast of Sumatra, gold headdresses and jewellery worn by priestesses served as a bridge between humans and supernaturals.

We end with verses taken from a Mahayana Buddhist text conjuring up all of the divine aspects of the colour yellow. ■

*"Going for refuge, I bow my head
In prostration to the golden conquerors.
Their compassionate light dispels the double mantle of darkness;
Buddhas are suns, blazing glory, splendor and renown.
Golden in colour, eyes fine as pure, faultless lapis,
They glow with the glitter of pure gold."*

THE GOLDEN LIGHT SUTRA

DARLENE KASTEN is a docent at the Malay Heritage Centre, STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery and the Asian Civilisations Museum which has an entire floor dedicated to Faiths & Beliefs. If you are curious to learn more about Judaism and Zoroastrianism, Singapore now has The Jews of Singapore Museum and a new Parsi and Zoroastrian Museum that you can visit.



In this portable Christian shrine, the illuminated Virgin and Child are flanked by an angel and a bearded figure with a halo. The inside of the doors show two haloed saints.

Dangers and Delights of Durian



Fresh durian, open and ready for eating. Photo by Pesce Huang on Unsplash.

TIM CLARK REMINISCES ABOUT HIS ADDICTION TO THIS YELLOW-FLESHED, THORNY-CROWNED 'KING OF FRUITS'

Once almost caused a road accident in Malaysia. And I wasn't even driving. I was sitting at a stall by a crossroads and eating. The driver, who was so distracted that he almost collided with another car, had clearly never seen an *ang moh* eating durian before. A monkey riding a bicycle would have been no more surprising, nor more eye-catching.

Europeans are not supposed to enjoy eating durian. Though many of the more adventurous do acquire a taste for jackfruit, which is nicknamed 'White Man's Durian'. It has been described as "like eating custard while on the loo". But that didn't prevent the durian from becoming an object of fascination. And since it would be impossible to cultivate in Europe, a painting of a durian would have been an important exhibit in Farquhar's collection of 477 specimens of Malaya's flora and fauna. This spiked, armoured fruit needed to be seen to be believed. And it only needed to be smelt to be shunned.

HEALTH WARNING

Durian can be dangerous. Any local durian fancier will warn you about the possibly fatal consequence of drinking cognac while eating durian. This is based on the belief that both are extremely 'heaty', and that the combination could prove deadly. Dismiss it as an old wives' tale if you like, but I've never met anyone who dared to disprove the theory.

Overeating certainly can have some unhealthy side-effects. It can leave you with a sore throat, for example.



Watercolour of durians from the William Farquhar Collection (1819-1823), National Museum of Singapore. This watercolour is not currently on display although a similar study of jackfruit is on view.

Which is why, after a durian feast you would be wise to take something alkaline like salted water or Eno Fruit Salt. Alternatively, it is recommended that you eat durian in combination with the 'Queen of Fruits': Mangosteen, which acts as a 'cooling' antidote.

KILLER FRUIT

The most dangerous encounter you can have with a durian comes not from eating it. Durian trees grow exceedingly tall, and a single fruit can weigh up to four kilogrammes. Imagine the effect such a menacing object would have if it fell on a human head. According to folklore, durians normally fall at night when there is no one about. Besides the durian is believed to have eyes to see who is below and to avoid striking the righteous. However, to sit under a durian tree would be to tempt fate, which is why no one in their right mind would pick such a place for a picnic. So why did Raden Saleh paint just such a scene?

ARTISTIC LICENSE TO POKE FUN

Raden Saleh (1811-1880) was commissioned by a Scottish merchant to paint four landscapes of Java to take back to Britain as souvenirs. Two of these are on view at Singapore's National Gallery and the one featured here suggests that the artist had a sense of humour. Why else would he depict Javanese relaxing under a durian tree? We can only wonder whether the Scottish patron was in on the joke.

DINING RECOMMENDATION

I would not advise you to serve durian at a formal dinner party. Quite apart from the likelihood that it would not appeal to some of your guests, there is no genteel way to consume this fruit. Table manners and cutlery need to be put aside, as separating the yellow flesh from the seeds it envelops is a noisy, messy, manual process. This heavenly feast makes a diabolical spectacle.

The best quality durians tend to be those with relatively small seeds to maximise the gorgeous gooey flesh. The durian seeds are inedible, unlike those of the jackfruit which, after boiling and salting, provide a nice nutty snack.



Hunting for durian by night at one of the many specialist stalls in Geylang. The Chinese text reads: Mao Shan Wang (Cat Mountain King), one of the most popular varieties of durian sold in Singapore, prized for its bittersweet taste. Photo by the author.



Detail from Javanese Temple in Ruins, 1860 by Raden Saleh. Oil on canvas. Collection of Smithsonian American Art Museum. On display at the National Gallery of Singapore.

HAVE DURIAN, CANNOT TRAVEL

Durian is a much-treasured treat, but it is not cheap. You can pay as much as \$200 for just one fruit in Singapore. In Geylang there are shops that specialise in durian and their stalls are lit up at night displaying a blaze of green and yellow. Outside Singapore prices are cheaper and there are nine different varieties to be found in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. If you drive to Malaysia, I recommend you eat your durian where you find it. If you import it, your car will smell of durian for weeks after. And if you get caught carrying durian on the MRT you will be fined.

I took a group of students on a field trip to the Philippines. The durians were so cheap there that we all gorged ourselves and regretted that we could not bring some back for friends and family in Singapore. Inevitably, some dare-devil students packed the durian flesh in air-tight containers in the hope of smuggling them onto the plane, but they were sniffed out and threatened with confiscation. They were lucky not to have been fined and luckier still to be allowed to consume rather than surrender their contraband before boarding.

DURIAN DIPLOMACY

Because junkies are apt to become pushers, I look upon it as a constant challenge to cure friends of the notion that they cannot abide durian. And I have a method based on a soft introduction, before weaning them onto the hard stuff of the fresh fruit itself. It's a recipe for bread-and-butter pudding, each slice smeared with – you guessed it – lashings of durian.

The taste is distinctive yet mild and it has encouraged even the most timid of guests to overcome their reservations concerning this divine king, nay, emperor of fruits. 🍌

TIM CLARK is an FOM docent, semi-retired NTU lecturer and fruit bat.

COVERED IN GOLD



The Shwedagon complex with the Golden Stupa on the right, Yangon.

UTA WEIGELT GOES IN SEARCH OF GOLD IN MYANMAR AND STRIKES IT RICH

All photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

Millenia ago, merchants of the pan-Indian Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE) referred to Lower Myanmar and the Thai-Malay peninsula as Suvannabhumi, which means “Golden Realm”. Travelling around Myanmar today, one quickly understands why the country is still nicknamed “The Golden Land”.

MAKING MERIT FOR GOLDEN KARMA

Myanmar is dotted with thousands of temples, stupas, and pagodas that are adorned with gold inside and out. They contain Buddha images, votive objects and furniture also covered in this precious metal.

Close to 90 per cent of the population are Theravada Buddhists and making merit is an important element of their faith. Donating gold to a pagoda or monastery is a popular way to accumulate merit in hope of a better future life.

Burmese Buddhists have traditionally spent large amounts of money on gilding pagodas, Buddha images, and the like. Gold for this purpose comes in many forms, from wafer-thin gold leaf to thicker and larger plates to cover the roof of a stupa.



Gold beaters in Mandalay. Notice the coconut shell water clock at their feet.

The amount of gold donated varies. A poor devotee in a remote village might paste just a single small sheet of gold leaf onto a Buddha statue. Whereas in the 15th century, a Mon queen donated her bodyweight in gold (about 40 kilogrammes) to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.

Even today, when ancient holy sites need to be restored and renovated, there is no shortage of donations. Money pours in from the devotees to acquire gold plates, sheets, and leaves for these stupas.



Devotees applying gold leaf on the Mahamuni Buddha. The lumps on the body are thick layers of gold applied over the years. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

GOLD TAKES A BEATING

Many Buddhist images and sites are adorned with gold leaf in daily worship. In Mandalay, the last royal capital of Myanmar and the traditional centre of gold beating, one can still witness the labour intensive process of making gold leaf. It hasn't changed over the centuries and requires strength, patience, and a steady hand.

Small bits of processed gold are put between sheets of bamboo paper in packages of 200 layers, which are then wrapped in deer hide, clamped in a frame, and continuously pounded by strong men using three kilogramme sledgehammers.

To measure time, the men use a simple clepsydra (water clock) – half a coconut shell with a hole in it floating in a bowl of water. The coconut shell slowly fills with water. When it has sunk to the bottom the workers take a 15-minute break.

They take more than six hours to beat the gold into sheets of 0.000143 millimetres, a mere fraction of the thickness of human hair (0.08 millimetres). In a room sealed off from any draft, women cut the foil into small squares, place them one by one between paper and stack them in parcels of ten or one hundred each.

Gold leaf is often sold at stalls at stupas. Once bought, they are immediately sent off on a small flying chariot directly to workers who apply it on a pagoda's roof.

THE WORLD'S MOST STUPENDOUS STUPA

The Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon is the most sacred Buddhist stupa in Myanmar and one of the most important religious reliquary monuments in the world. It was constructed over 1,000 years ago and houses among other relics, eight hairs from the head of the Gautama Buddha. It is said that 60 tons of gold have been used

to adorn the entire stupa. Situated on top of Singuttara Hill, it is surrounded by numerous religious buildings, monasteries, and prayer halls.

Ralph Fitch, the first Englishman to visit Yangon at the end of the 16th century described the Shwedagon as “of a wonderful bignesse, and all gilded from the foot to the toppe. It is the fairest place as I suppose that is in this world.”

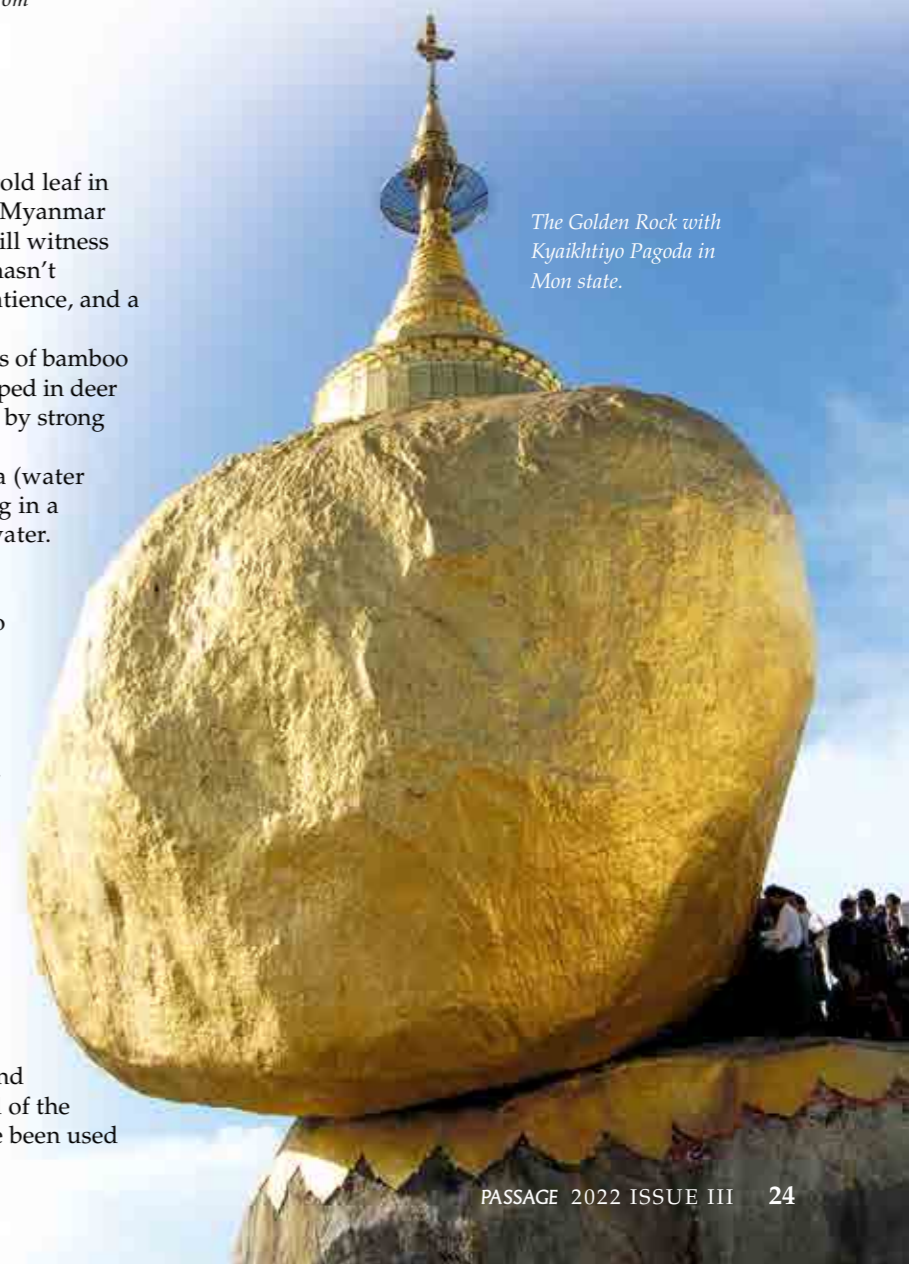
Another important sacred Buddhist site is the Kyaikhtiyo Pagoda, better known as Golden Rock, in Mon State. The small pagoda sits on top of a 7.3-metre tall boulder that teeters at the edge of a cliff.

It enshrines a hair of the Buddha. Both the rock and the pagoda are fully covered in gold. Hundreds of pilgrims visit the site every day. But only men are allowed to touch the rock and apply gold leaf as an act of devotion and merit making.

COVERED IN A THOUSAND LAYERS OF GOLD LEAF

Some of the most revered Buddha images are covered with so many layers of gold leaf that their original shape is no longer discernible. In Mandalay the famous Mahamuni Buddha is covered with a lumpy coat of gold leaf that is said to be 15 centimetres thick in some places.

The Phaung Da U Pagoda at Inle Lake accommodates five Buddha images dating to the 12th century. Today their original shape is barely recognisable. Over time countless layers of gold leaf applied by devotees have turned them into five nugget-like looking forms. However, this does not detract Buddhist believers from revering the images.



The Golden Rock with Kyaikhtiyo Pagoda in Mon state.



The Lion Throne depicted in *A Royal Audience* by Burmese painter Saya Chone, 1900s. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

ROYAL REGALIA

Over centuries, gold has been used to display wealth and power by the ruling elite. The use of gold was documented as far back as the Pyu kingdoms. Chinese envoys are quoted in the 11th century *New History of the Tang*: “The Pyu wear gold-flowered hats and caps of kingfisher feathers strung with various jewels.”

In more modern times, Burmese kings were famous for their golden treasures, jewellery, regalia, and furnishings. After the fall of Mandalay to the British in 1885, the royal regalia including the famous Lion Throne were taken to India and Great Britain.

The Lion Throne, the only surviving historic throne used by Burmese monarchs, was brought back to Yangon from India in 1959. The royal regalia made of pure gold was kept in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London but was returned to Myanmar in 1964. Today these royal treasures can be admired in the National Museum in Yangon.

To flaunt their wealth to foreign powers Burmese kings used gold sheets to write official letters on. The famous

Golden Letter that King Alaungpaya of Burma sent to King George II of Great Britain in 1756 is the only surviving example. It is adorned with 24 Mogok rubies and is imprinted with the royal seal. Together with its original lidded ivory container it is held in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library in Hanover, Germany.

THE HUMAN COST

Some of Myanmar’s gold is laboriously mined by workers who toil under terrible working conditions in the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers in Kachin and Kayin States and in gold mines around Mandalay, Sagaing, Bago and Tanintharyi.

Without any protective gear, migrant workers are exposed to mercury, a highly toxic metal that is used to amalgamate gold. The heavy metal pollution caused by gold mining, also poisons the waters, and destroys fish stocks. However, the yield of these domestic mines cannot meet the demand for gold in Myanmar. Today gold is mainly imported from Thailand and the United Arab Emirates.



The Golden Letter studded with rubies, 1756. Photo courtesy of the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library, Hanover.



A kammavaca, a Buddhist ordination manuscript. Photo courtesy of the ACM.

BEHOLD THE GOLDEN GOOSE

Some of Myanmar’s golden treasures can be admired in Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). In the Ancestors and Rituals Gallery there is a *hintha*, a mythical golden bird crafted in the shape of a species of goose associated with royalty and the Mon civilisation. It was made in the late 19th century in Mandalay. A relief-molded paste called *thayo* on the wooden base is lacquered red, adorned with glass and mirror inlays and gilded. A precious ceremonial vessel like this would have held donations made by rich devotees to the Buddhist temples as an act of merit making.

Another interesting artefact from Myanmar is an ivory Buddhist manuscript embellished with gold. To create the gold decoration on the folios, a negative design is painted onto the dry lacquered surface with a mixture of neem tree resin and orpiment, a yellow mineral. Then a thin layer of




Ceremonial vessel in the shape of a hintha. Photo courtesy of the ACM.



Gold Qur'an box. Photo courtesy of the ACM.

lacquer is added. Before it is fully hardened, sheets of gold leaf are applied and will only stick to areas left untouched by the resin and orpiment mixture. After drying, the excess is rinsed off with water and the intricate design appears.

ACM’s Islamic Gallery yields another interesting golden artefact from Myanmar. It is a Qur’an box on a stand decorated in style of lacquerware from Mandalay. The panels on the four sides of the box feature the *shahadah*, a profession of faith. This beautifully embellished box was probably made for a Muslim customer at the end of the 19th century, when there was a small Muslim community in Mandalay.

The nickname “The Golden Land” always rings true in Myanmar with its glittering golden stupas and pagodas reflecting the golden rays of the sun. If you can’t travel to Myanmar catch a glimpse of its golden treasures at the ACM. 

UTA WEIGELT, an ACM docent, would like to dedicate this article to her teacher and friend U Than Htun (1949–2022).

THE MYSTERY OF THE YELLOW DRESS AND ITS MATCHING SHIRT

FLAVIA JUNQUEIRA CONSIDERS WHY A COUPLE MIGHT CHOOSE TO WEAR MATCHING CLOTHES AND DISCOVERS A FAMOUS DUO WHO DID SO

Among some of the stunning garments in the current exhibition “Fashionable in Asia” at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), there’s one that might go unnoticed to less attentive eyes.

Discreetly placed close to a corner and gently lit so as to protect its fragile textile, this dress and matching shawl made in the 1990s reveals to those who care to stop to contemplate it the gentle sheen of its lavish yellow silk. Combining the tailoring of the typical Chinese dress, the cheongsam, with the iconic Southeast Asian textile, batik, this ensemble encapsulates Singapore’s identity.

Even more so when we discover that it had been worn by “the mother of Singapore”, the remarkable Madam Kwa Geok Choo, the wife and quiet force behind the most important man in the history of modern Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

THE MODEST LADY WHO MADE SINGAPORE HISTORY

The history of Singapore might have been different without Madam Kwa. In her obituary, Mr Lee acknowledged that “Without her, I would be a different man, with a different life.” A devoted wife, she was at his first political discourse in 1950 in England where they were both law students. In Singapore, she supported his early political career by continuing her law practice as a partner at Lee & Lee while taking care of their eldest son, who is now Singapore’s current Prime Minister.

Born in 1920 to a Peranakan family, Madam Kwa was described by many as a simple, yet sophisticated woman of impeccable taste and high education. Wise and compassionate, she is remembered for her public appearances with her husband.

On these formal occasions, she consistently dressed in cheongsam, despite the changes in fashion over the years. According to her tailor, “She preferred pastel-coloured clothes that were either plain or with minimum embellishments.”

However, when looking at her photographs in the press, one may notice that she was occasionally seen in bright colors. Especially after her stroke in 2003, when she abandoned the cheongsam for her formal public appearances and adopted



Yellow batik silk cheongsam worn by Madam Kwa Geok Choo on display at the ACM. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore. Gift of Madam Kwa. Photo by the author.



Yellow damask silk jacket worn by Madam Kwa Geok Choo. Gift of Madam Kwa. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore.

pants and mandarin-collared silk jackets embellished with traditional Chinese knotted buttons. One example of such a jacket is the yellow silk damask one in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

ALWAYS ELEGANT YET UNDERSTATED

Madam Kwa’s batik silk cheongsam and matching *selendang* (shawl) exhibited in the ACM combines a bright yellow colour with subtle tones of blue and gray in a motif of abstract flowers encapsulated in lozenge-shaped cartouches. Its overall appearance is luxurious yet understated. Discretion is a characteristic often associated with Madam Kwa, who chose to remain on the sidelines, providing strength and support to her husband, despite her own remarkable achievements. In her youth, she was a Queen’s Scholar of Malaya, graduated from Cambridge with first-class honours and became one of the first few female lawyers in Singapore when she was called to the Colony Bar in 1951.

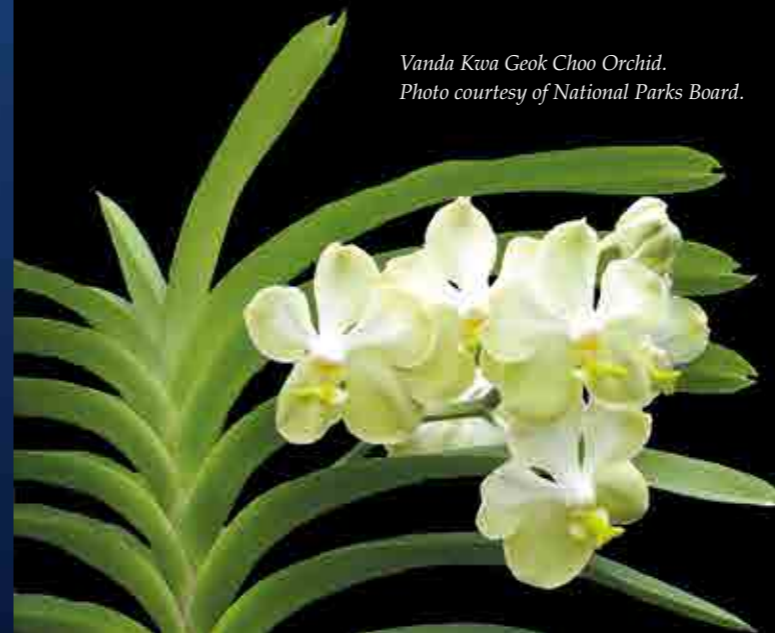
For Singaporeans, her image is irrevocably associated with that of her husband, to whom she was married for 63 years. “A happy marriage”, in Mr Lee’s own words. Former journalist Irene Ng, who interviewed the couple, described them as a team. And many articles were written celebrating their union, portraying their everlasting bond.

HONOURED WITH YELLOW ORCHIDS

They were even paid homage by the creation of matching yellow hybrid orchids named after them. In 1995, the National Parks created the orchid *Vanda Kwa Geok Choo* to honor Madam Kwa, who was a botanical enthusiast.

Then in 2015, an orchid named after Mr Lee Kuan Yew was created to match that of his wife’s, both in

Vanda Kwa Geok Choo Orchid. Photo courtesy of National Parks Board.



Aranda Lee Kuan Yew Orchid. Photo courtesy of National Parks Board.

colour, shape, and size. Like the iconic loving couple who inspired them, these orchids have much in common. And like the couple’s matching outfits these orchids perfectly complement each other.

Judging by what is portrayed in the media about the couple, Madam Kwa probably inspired Mr Lee in many ways. Apparently, she was the one who liaised with his tailor and took care of how he dressed. I was surprised to find a picture taken in 2006 during a meeting with former Indonesian president Suharto in which Mr Lee is dressed in a shirt made of the same yellow silk batik used for Madam Kwa’s dress in the ACM.

THE PERFECT MATCH

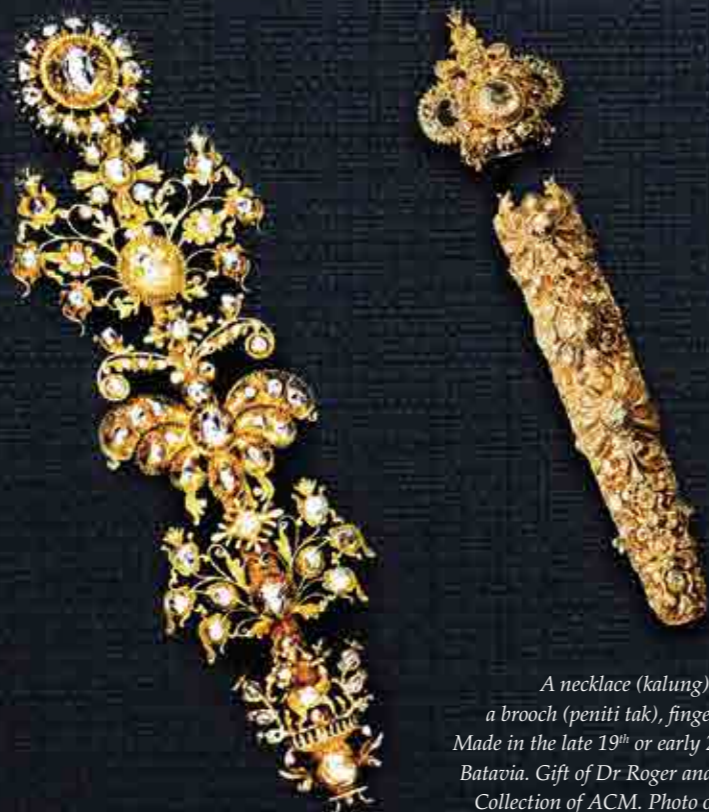
Why do couples wear matching outfits? Apparently, it has many emotional benefits, including boosting their relationships. Matching outfits also show how coordinated a couple is. It can be a fun thing, an inside joke for some couples, while others might make matching outfits to commemorate treasured shared memories. However, in the case of Mr and Mrs Lee Kuan Yew, they did not seem to have worn their matching clothes at the same time. On the mentioned occasion in Indonesia, Madam Kwa was wearing a blue garment, not the yellow batik dress.

So, why did they have these matching outfits? Were they tailored by the same person? Was it a gift, a coincidence, or an inside joke? Were they ever worn by the couple at the same time? All these remain a mystery, so if you know more about the history of the yellow dress and its matching shirt, please share it with us! [P](#)

FLAVIA JUNQUEIRA is an ACM docent who has rediscovered her childhood passion for fashion through the stunning garments exhibited at the ACM.

GEMS FROM A GOLDEN ISLE

PRISCYLLA SHAW REFLECTS ON HYBRID JEWELLERY FOR A COLOURFUL COLONIAL SOCIETY



A necklace (kalung) with crown pendant, a brooch (peniti tak), fingernail guard and ring. Made in the late 19th or early 20th century, probably Batavia. Gift of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette. Collection of ACM. Photo of necklace courtesy of the ACM. Photos of the brooch, ring and fingernail guard by Priscylla Shaw.

In the Jewellery Gallery on the third floor of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) there is a stunning suite of jewellery that never fails to catch my attention. These four exquisite gold and diamond pieces were made in Batavia in the late 19th to early 20th century when Indonesia was still a Dutch colony. The brooch, ring and fingernail guard were likely made by the same goldsmith. The necklace is a separate piece.

Gazing at them, I wonder about their history and the people who wore them. There are clues in their design that hint that their owners may have been from a hybrid culture, possibly Indonesian-Peranakan. Jewellers in Southeast Asia have often incorporated a myriad of cultural influences in the design and making of jewellery. In port cities in

particular, the cosmopolitan taste of a diverse clientele was reflected in the jewellery commissioned by them.

A LAND RICH IN GOLD AND DIAMONDS

Indonesia is famed for its gold deposits and is home to one of the largest industrial gold mines in the world – the Grasberg mine in the Papua province. The country produces about four percent of the world’s gold supply. Traditionally, Sumatra was referred to as the “Isle of Gold”. It is likely that the gold used for the ACM suite was mined in Sumatra or Java.

The diamond mines of Sukdana, Landak and Cempaka have supplied Southeast Asia since the 15th century. The Cempaka mine in South Kalimantan, Borneo is one of the largest in the world. All four pieces in the suite are lavishly set with *intan* (rose-cut diamonds). Indonesian jewellers favoured the uniqueness of *intan* over perfectly identical brilliant-cut ones. It is likely that the diamonds used came from Kalimantan.



View of Batavia showing the busy harbour, Dutch factories and settlements. Coloured print, England, 1754. Collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

BATAVIA, A CONFLUENCE OF CULTURES

Indonesia fell under Dutch control during the Dutch Republic period (1579–1795) through its trading colossus the Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie (VOC). When the VOC collapsed at the end of the 18th century, the Dutch crown governed Indonesia as a colony until 1941.

The VOC had taken control of Sunda Kelapa in 1619 and renamed it Batavia after a region in Holland at the mouth of the Rhine. Batavia became the VOC’s trading headquarters and became an important hub in Southeast Asia. By the 18th century, Batavia was a thriving port city with a culturally diverse community comprising the indigenous Javanese, Malays of Sumatra, Indians, Chinese, and Dutch.

The Chinese came mainly from southern China and formed the third-largest ethnic group with around 30,000 people, most of them men. There was mass migration of Chinese workers to Indonesia, many fleeing the crumbling Qing dynasty in search of a better life in “Nanyang”, the South Seas. At the time, Chinese women could not travel outside China, so the men often married local women in Batavia.

By the late 19th century, the descendants of Chinese mixed marriages, known as Tionghoa Peranakans (native-born Chinese), had become a distinct cultural sub-group. Their culture was a hybrid one, with influences from their mixed ancestry. This was translated into their clothing and jewellery.

HYBRID DESIGNS

The design of the jewellery in the ACM suite shows influences from the Malay, Chinese, and Dutch-European cultures.

THE NECKLACE

The necklace is made in a long, sectioned Malay-world style known as *kalung*. The crescent-shape in the pendant is an ancient Malay-world motif, the waxing moon signifying renewal of life. In Sumatra and the outer Indonesian islands like Sumba and Nias, this shape is interpreted as a feminine motif. Also of the Malay world are the paisley-shapes above the crescent, which are of Persian and Indian-Kashmiri origin.

The pendant incorporates a prominent Dutch-European element, a hooped crown. The style of the crown – five hoops rising from the band, joined in the middle under an orb –

may have been inspired by the crown of King William II of the Netherlands, created in 1840. Incorporating the crown in the necklace could have been a way of borrowing a familiar royal motif to enhance the piece and aggrandise its wearer. But ironically, as the Dutch state treasury was virtually empty at the time, King William’s crown was made of gilt silver, glass stones and 72 imitation pearls.



The crown of King William II of the Netherlands, created in 1840. Collection of the Diamant Museum, Amsterdam.

The Chinese detail on the necklace appears in the form of delicate pomegranate shapes hanging from tiny gold loops underneath the crescent. In Chinese culture, pomegranates are a symbol of fertility and a wish for many offspring. There are numerous loops on the necklace, hinting that there were originally more than the two pomegranates that remain.

The necklace is a *tour de force* creation of its maker. Its design is balanced and graceful, its workmanship, superior. For instance, each diamond setting is painstakingly enhanced with *mille grain* reminiscent of Malay-style granulation, which makes the entire necklace look even more ornate.

The craftsman was familiar with Malay-world style and used its motifs confidently. In comparison, the Chinese motif of pomegranates appears to be just a minor addition. Given these details, one might guess that the goldsmith was likely a Javanese craftsman and not Chinese.

The combination of Malay, Chinese and Dutch motifs could support a guess that the necklace was an Indonesian-Peranakan commission. The pomegranates suggest that the necklace was commissioned for a lady, not a gentleman.

THE BROOCH, RING, AND FINGERNAIL GUARD

These three pieces share similarities in their high gold content, detail, and workmanship. For example, the larger solitaires on all three are set in a similar style.

The brooch, known as a *peniti tak*, was used to fasten the *baju panjang* or *kebaya* worn by women of different communities in colonial Indonesia. The motifs on this brooch are auspicious Chinese symbols. Pomegranates symbolise fertility, butterflies symbolise marital bliss, and deer

symbolise longevity and good fortune. The openwork of the brooch is reminiscent of Victorian or Edwardian jewellery.

The design of the ring is reminiscent of a European crown in its curved sides and orb-and-cross details. Pomegranates subtly decorate the base of the ring, also above the cross.

The fingernail guard is a Chinese design influenced by the late Qing dynasty. It was fashionable for ladies of the Qing court to protect their long nails with nail guards. Long fingernails were seen as a mark of refinement. The Empress Dowager Cixi famously wore such nail guards.

Chinese fingernail guards were often made of filigree and were light, so they were functional. However, this one in the ACM suite is heavy and made of solid gold. This suggests that it was worn only for show to flaunt the owner's wealth, perhaps when having a portrait taken.



These two women wear multiple pieces of jewellery, including *peniti tak* (brooches) to fasten their *baju panjang*. The woman on the left has *sangketan* jewellery at her waist, comprising a highly decorative silver keyholder attached to an assortment of various charms including a lime paste case, tobacco box and keys. *Sangketan* jewellery was frequently used by Chinese ladies in West Java and Batavia. She also holds a fan in her hand. The woman on the right wears a necklace with a lizard and a large, ornate pendant (belt buckle) at her waist. She poses with an umbrella. These details suggest that they were wealthy. Photo taken between 1924-1932. Photographer unknown. Collection of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.



An oil painting of Cixi wearing fingernail guards. The banner above her reads from right to left: 《大清國慈禧皇太后》(The great Qing Dynasty Empress Dowager Cixi). She was 71 years old when this portrait was painted, but looks considerably younger. At her request, the artist enlarged her eyes and plumped her lips in the painting. Painted in 1905 by Dutch painter Hubert Vos (1855-1935). Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing. On display at the Summer Palace. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

The workmanship of the brooch, ring and nail guard and the liberal and precise use of auspicious Chinese motifs suggest that the craftsman was likely a Chinese goldsmith, not Javanese.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

The suite of jewellery in the ACM was probably made in Batavia because it was a bustling port city flush with trade wealth, where skilled goldsmiths found no shortage of lucrative commissions from rich customers.

The pieces demonstrate that these craftsmen were adept at borrowing and adapting 'foreign' styles in their creations. The pieces also give us a glimpse into the multicultural colonial society of Batavia at the time.

They were generously donated to the ACM in 2019 by a well-known collector of Peranakan jewellery and objects, Mrs Betty Mariette and her late husband Dr Roger Mariette.

Mrs Mariette recalls that she acquired the necklace and the pieces separately about 25 to 30 years ago. Jewellery of this quality is a rare find, she says, because they are very personal items and are the last things that even a family fallen on hard times would part with. She wondered if the necklace might have had royal connections as it possibly came from Solo, a historic royal city. As for the other pieces, the ornate yet highly impractical fingernail guard settled that purchase as it amused her to imagine the wearer showing it off.

The colonial era has passed but we have these beautiful jewellery pieces from the golden isle to tell their stories. **P**

PRISCYLLA SHAW is a new member of FOM. She looks forward to the activities planned for the year. She has an MA, History of Art and Archaeology from SOAS.



Threads of Gold

ROSSMAN ITHNAIN'S SEARCH FOR MALAY-STYLE EMBROIDERY MADE IN SINGAPORE LEADS TO A SURPRISING FIND

Photos by the author.

Singapore's Malay population is a reflection of our "Se Nusantara" links. *Se Nusantara* means "of one archipelago". Singapore Malays are of various ancestries including Javanese, Baweanese, Banjarese, Minangkabau, Bugis, Orang Laut and Orang Melayu which collectively form the Singapore Malay identity. It is a diverse community reflecting its close association with the immediate region.

Additionally, Malay material culture, customs and traditions are also influenced by interactions and exchanges with other Muslim communities in Singapore or elsewhere including the Indian Muslim, Jawi Peranakan and Arab/Hadrami communities. We can see the influence from faraway lands such as Egypt, Persia, Mughal India, China and Ottoman Turkey on the embroidery and needlework of the Malays.

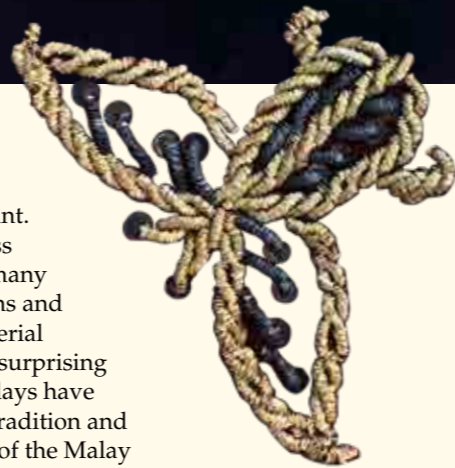
I have an interest in embroidery and needlework from the Malay world. Singapore is part of the Malay world and was at some point of our history, part of the Johor-Riau-Lingga

Sultanate. The Malay spoken in Singapore is of the Johor-Riau variant. Our interconnectedness is expressed through many aspects of our traditions and culture, including material culture. Thus, it is not surprising that the Singapore Malays have a similar embroidery tradition and aesthetic with the rest of the Malay world, particularly the Riau islands and Peninsula Malaysia.

THE RIAU CONNECTION

The Riau links became clear when I got to know Ibu Rosemawaty, a practitioner of the Malay *kelingkam* embroidery in Tanjong Pinang, Bintan. She told me that the tradition of *kelingkam* remained to this day in Lingga and Natuna, Kepulauan Riau province, as the *tudung manto* (*kelingkam* shawl) is part of the Riau Malay ladies' attire. It takes six to eight weeks to complete a *kelingkam* head shawl of 150 by 70 centimetres. It is a time-consuming process given the delicate nature of the *kelingkam* embroidery which is a technique using thin ribbon-like silver or gold coloured threads known as lametta and is done by *tikam tembus* (piercing through) using a special flat two eyed needle. Apart from the Riau, it is also practised in Malaysia notably Sarawak, Selangor and Kelantan. There are regional variations to the style and motifs employed.

Kelingkam embroidery is not well-known even within the Malay community. This got me wondering about



embroidery and needlework made by Malay ladies in Singapore. I vividly remember that wedding celebrations during my childhood in the 1960s and 70s were communal and family affairs. Ladies of the community would come together to contribute their expertise in decorating the bridal dais, bridal attire and bridal chamber with their creativity and needlework skills. I wonder what has happened to those traditions and skills today. So I embarked on a search for made-in-Singapore Malay needlework.

KAMPUNG JAWA: A HABERDASHERY HUB

In the past, Arab Street was known as Kampung Jawa (not to be confused with today's Kampong Java Road which lies between Bukit Timah Road and Little India). It was the go-to place for materials such as beads, *benang gim* (thin gold threads), lametta and sequins used in Malay needlework and embroidery. It was a thriving textiles and haberdashery hub of the region.

Kampung Gelam where Arab Street is located was a royal town where the Istana Kampung Gelam stands (today's Malay Heritage Centre) and the royal family that once occupied the building has links with the Johor-Riau-Lingga Sultanate.

Songket makers from the East Coast of Malaysia would come to Arab Street to sell their beautiful *songket* and buy new supplies to produce their woven fabrics. I assume that this would be the case too for other crafts such as embroidery and needlework.

There is ample evidence from my photo collection of past Singapore Malay weddings that embroidery and needlework were used extensively in wedding decorations and attire. However, in my many years of collecting Malay embroidery, I have not seen actual examples that were made in Singapore nor met local practitioners of the craft.

HIDDEN TREASURE IN PLAIN SIGHT

Imagine my excitement when I discovered pieces of Singapore-made Malay embroidery and needlework from a place that I had previously visited many times over.

A chance conversation with the Aljunied siblings (Mohamad, Zahra and Radhiyah) at their shop, Toko Aljunied on Arab Street, about my encounter with *kelingkam* embroidery in Riau led to them showing me their paternal great-grandmother's embroidery and needlework.

Sharifah Alawiyah bte Abu Bakar Aljunied or "Mak Tok" as her grandchildren and great-grandchildren affectionately called her, had a deep interest in Malay culture, including embroidery and needlework craft.

Mak Tok was Hadrami, but she was always immaculately dressed in Malay *baju kurung* made of *kasa rubia* (swiss voile). Mak Tok was also known in the community as Wan Kechot on account of her small stature.

Although Mak Tok and her daughters dressed in the Malay style and adopted the Malay culture, the Aljunied men, in contrast, retained their Hadrami attire. She passed away in 1968.

The pieces I've chosen to highlight are only a fraction of Mak Tok's needlework. These date back to the 1940s or even earlier and encompass various styles of embroidery such as *tekat kelingkam*, *tekat gubah*, *tekat kertas perada mas* and *tekat*



Singapore Malay ladies in the early 1900s. The woman on the right wears a *kelingkam* head shawl. Photo from the author's collection.

benang gim. They were made for and used during weddings and other celebratory events which were grand affairs.

The Malay influence on the needlework is also not surprising as the Aljunieds had first settled in Palembang after leaving Hadhramaut in Yemen before dispersing to other parts of Southeast Asia. They interacted with the local Malay communities wherever they settled. I was told that there was a link via marriage to a Riau royal whose family, the Bin Shehabs, also originated from Hadhramaut.

Today, Mak Tok's descendant who is in her 80s still does Malay-style needlework, but only when requested by close family members. Given her age, her pieces are much simpler than they used to be.



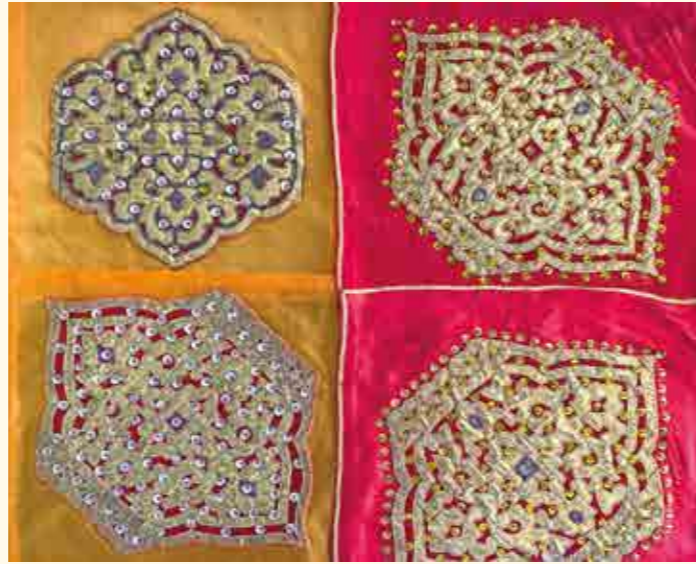
THE ALJUNIED COLLECTION

Here are some examples of made in Singapore Malay-style embroidery and needlework from Radhiyah Aljunied's family collection.



Ceremonial fans (Kipas Pengantin)

This pair of ceremonial wedding fans is decorated with silver flower-shaped ornaments on a blue velvet base on one side and a red velvet base on the other. Popular colours for base cloth were navy blue, maroon and green. These bridal fans were a standard feature of Malay weddings in the past. When the groom first appears, the *Mak Andam* (Wedding Mistress who assists the bride), would shield the bride's face with one of the fans. Throughout the ceremony, there would be two *pengapit* (bridesmaids) who used these to fan the bridal couple.



Bolster ends (Muka Bantal)

These are several examples of bolster ends which are decorated with *tekat perada kertas emas*, a needlework technique using gold paper cut-outs sewn onto fabric. The appliqués are sewn on using a stitch known as *gigi belalang* (grasshopper's teeth). This decorative technique is also used in Terengganu, Pahang and Riau.



Valance (Tirai)

The large, colourful valance (85 by 300 centimetres) was used as a background for a wedding dais. It is decorated with floral motifs reminiscent of Minangkabau and Straits Chinese embroidery done in a *tekat gubah* technique. *Tekatek Gubah* is a flat surface embroidery as opposed to *tekat timbul* (raised embroidery). This technique is often described as "outline embroidery". Gold or silver threads are laid down to outline patterns that were previously drawn and then secured with red thread stitches.



A boy's pink baju kurung top

This boy's pink *baju kurung* top is decorated with scattered silver ornaments (*sulaman bertabur*) used for special occasions, like the *cukur rambut* (trimming of hair) ceremony where a young boy's head is shaved bald.



Tray covers (Penutup Talam)

Three tray covers (oval, circular and square shaped) decorated in the style of *sulaman bertabur* and *benang gim* and with the parameter of the cover decorated by the tatting technique. *Sulaman bertabur* is a form of needlework with *bertabur* (scattered) silver ornaments sewn onto the base cloth.



Shawl (Selendang)

Details from two *kelingkam tudung* (head shawls). The pink one is decorated with the *teluk berantai* (chained bay), a classic Malay motif. These shawls are similar to the Riau *tudung manto*.

The Malay embroidery and needlework tradition in Singapore has never been fully explored or researched. It is today a fading craft tradition in Singapore and I can only conclude that there are not many practitioners left. Fortunately, the discovery of these old locally made Malay embroidery confirms the practice of this craft in Singapore and that their techniques were similar with those of the larger Malay world, the *Nusantara*. 📌

ROSSMAN ITHNAIN is a passionate collector of artefacts from the Malay world, past and present.

CELEBRITY

DUCK



JO WRIGHT LOOKS AT ACM'S MOST POPULAR ARTEFACT

What artefact in the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) collection has consistently brought a smile to the face of visitors, young and old? What piece challenges existing assumptions as to what should be held in museum collections? Which object has been one of the most popular artefacts to guide to students over the years?

The answer to all the above is the little yellow rubber ducky which was displayed for many years in the Shaw Foyer of the ACM, as part of the story of the Singapore River. It made a popular return appearance to ACM in the recent "Faith Beauty Love Hope" special exhibition at that museum.

But why was it held at the museum in the first place and how did it manage to hold its place amongst the museum's more august artefacts?

"DEAD CHICKEN RIVER" – NO PLACE FOR DUCKS

The story starts back in 1977 when the then Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew launched the great river clean-up. It was sorely needed, as in the rush to nationhood, the county's waterways - and in particular the Singapore River and Kallang Basin - had become badly polluted. It was said that you could smell the Singapore River even before you could see it! The Kallang River in particular had the nickname "Dead Chicken River" which gives some idea of what you could expect to see in its murky waters.

To enable the Prime Minister's vision, a multi-agency government taskforce set to work and over the next ten years spent \$300 million on the project. The clean-up was officially declared complete in 1987 and a five-day carnival was held in Marina Bay.

In 1998, someone came up with the idea of the Great Singapore Duck race, as a way of celebrating the now-sparkling waters of the Singapore River and as a great way to raise money for charity. It was an annual event until 2007.


LUCKY DUCKY WINS CASH

How did the duck race work? Quite simply, for \$10 you could sponsor a yellow rubber duck, each of which had a number painted on its bottom. The ducks were loaded into a truck and dropped into river at Clark Quay. The current gently swept them downstream to the finishing line opposite the ACM. The first duck to cross the finishing line won its owner a large pot of the money, with the rest going to charitable causes. Each year, so legend has it, the grateful owners donated their winning duck to the museum. The duck which was on display at ACM was the winner from the 2002 Great Singapore Duck Race.

The waters of the Singapore River no longer flow out to sea, thanks to the Marina Barrage, which was completed in 2008, and so yellow rubber ducky races are no longer possible, but the waters are alive with fish of all shapes and sizes. In fact, the waters of Singapore are now so healthy that they even support a thriving population of smooth-coated otters - testament to the success of the great river clean up!

ADOPTED BY DOCENT TRAINEES

The yellow rubber ducky itself has so entered the folklore of the docent population at ACM that one of the last year's docent training groups was even named "The Rubber Duckies", as that group had all been issued with yellow lanyards. How did "The Rubber Duckies" celebrate the end of the docent training year? Why, by floating a giant inflatable rubber duck in a swimming pool!

If you're interested in becoming a docent at ACM (but, sorry, no guarantee that you get a yellow lanyard while you're training!) then check out the details on the FOM website. 

JO WRIGHT became a docent at ACM in 2009 and delights in spinning yarns about the unlikeliest artefacts in the museum.

A GOLDEN GIFT FOR A SCHOLAR



A Chinese bronze recumbent lion paperweight. Photo courtesy of the ACM.

PAUL BROMBERG FOCUSES ON A LITTLE LION AT ACM THAT DESERVES OUR ATTENTION

In the Scholars Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), among several scholar's objects on display in one cabinet, is a charming late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) paperweight in the form of a recumbent leonine beast. Although classified as brass by the ACM curators, presumably because of its zinc content, this weight is a delightful example from the menagerie of Chinese bronze animal paperweights.

Just 6.1 centimetres in length, the beast's head looks upwards with its ears folded down while the eyes, eyebrows, *ruyi*-shaped nose and beard are all well defined. It has a flowing striated mane, a ridged spine with flames emanating from its haunches, and a trifurcated striated tail curling around its hindquarters. The beast's paws are also well defined. The patina is of a predominantly copper colour with some lighter areas showing traces of gilding.

Bronze weights in the form of animals, including those used as weights to hold down shrouds in tombs or mats on which the game of *liubo* was played, have been used in China since the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 CE).

Yet, it was only during the prosperous and peaceful Ming era that a scholar-literati class evolved, able to devote time and money to scholarly, artistic and collecting pursuits. Demand for scholar's objects increased significantly, leading to the flourishing production (likely centred in neighbouring Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces) of a variety of bronze accoutrements for the scholar's studio, including censers, flower vases and paperweights, and more.

This leonine paperweight was first and foremost a utilitarian object, produced to hold down the paper or silk on which the Chinese scholar wrote calligraphy or painted, but could simultaneously also be used as a brush rest.


Finely cast, detailed patterns were applied to the bronze through cold working (chasing and chiselling after casting). This resulted in a tactile object, often a charming and whimsical work of art that served to inspire and be appreciated.

SYMBOLIC VALUE OF THE LION

Paperweights also have various hidden meanings and cultural allusions, symbols of the taste and refinement of their owner. They represent zoomorphic figures, real and mythical, menacing and charming, that depict associations with philosophical, metaphorical and historical concepts. Some are of uncertain identity, the product of vivid artistic imagination, while others were drawn from legend, composed of a mixture of animal features, indicating auspiciousness.

The lion, admired for its strength and courage and thus known as 'King of the Beasts', was introduced to China, along with Buddhism, during the Han dynasty and remains closely associated with Buddhism. Given that local artisans were unlikely to have seen a real lion, depictions closely resembled dogs.

Dating of bronze paperweights is exceedingly difficult. Yet our present leonine example does present several clues in terms of detail to be found on its face and body that help identify its period of manufacture as being early 16th to 17th century. The beast has been furnished with typical Ming period features, such as the flames emanating from its fore and hind haunches and its *ruyi*-shaped nose.

Of considerable artistic merit, these small bronze articles were produced primarily for the use and amusement of members of the scholar-literati class. Indeed, they became ubiquitous, while also serving as excellent gifts to fellow scholar-collectors. 

PAUL BROMBERG resides in Bangkok and is an avid collector, especially of Thai *bencharong* and silver. He is a long-time contributing editor to the magazine *Arts of Asia*, and is the author of the book *Thai Silver and Nielloware* (2019).

YELLOW



Horizon – The Morning Spirit by Srihadi Soedarsono. Created during his residence at STPI in 2004. Photo courtesy of STPI.

HORIZONS

SEEMA DEVITRE CELEBRATES THE LIFE OF ARTIST SRIHADI SOEDARSONO

Indonesia has a propensity for birthing illustrious contemporary artists whose works are bursting with creativity and intensity of spirit. None shines more brightly than preeminent painter Srihadi Soedarsono, who after fulfilling a lifetime of work passed away peacefully at 90 in February this year.

Born in Surakarta, Central Java in 1931, Soedarsono studied in Bandung and graduated from Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) in 1959. He made his way to Ohio where he found appeal in Abstract Expressionism and completed a master's degree at Ohio State University. He later received a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship, returned to Indonesia as a Senior Scholar and achieved tenure as a Professor of Fine Art at ITB.

Regarded as one of the great masters of modern Indonesian painting, Soedarsono is best known for his pursuit of colour, pushing the boundaries of the visual spectrum, evoking emotion, movement and the divine. By focusing on the purity of each colour and its gestural movements on the canvas, Soedarsono conveys an energy both electric and serene. For the viewer this can be a profoundly spiritual experience.

“What you see in my painting is not a physical impression but rather a manifestation of the spiritual essence of the subject.”

- SRIHADI SOEDARSONO

Yellow, a remarkable and significant colour throughout the history of art, resonates through Soedarsono's paintings. “The use of gold in his paintings shows the

glory and prosperity of an era,” exclaimed Antara, Indonesia's News Agency.

Soedarsono is acclaimed for paintings that explore the horizon and landscapes that showcase the vibrancy of his homeland. The horizon holds a duality of meaning for him. It is the separation between earth and the rising or setting sun, but also between the temporal and spiritual worlds. When remembering a helicopter flight over Sorong, Papua in 1970, Soedarsono recalled, “The river looked golden from the sky when flying in the morning and afternoon.”

Yellow, or gold, being a prominent colour of choice in many of his works, evokes the Javanese mystic belief that God is manifest in all creation. Abstraction further enhances the truth of nature, its essence.

In 2004, Soedarsono became the very first Indonesian artist invited by STPI to be a part of the Visiting Artists Programme. He created 20 exquisite pieces during his residence at Robertson Quay. Amongst these are four mammoth prints masterfully handmade using lithography, woodcut and screen print, as well as 16 unique paper pulp works.

These works were imagined and produced with high calibre and incredible speed. They are exemplary, vast meditative landscapes, both colourful and full of texture. *Horizon – The Morning Spirit*, a beautifully created print, is an example of Soedarsono's unrivalled colour mastery. This work took eight plates to produce, each layer adding tone and texture to the image. The colours consist of multiple hues that are carefully layered and blended to



The artist at STPI in 2005. Photo courtesy of STPI.



Soedarsono's work, *Yellow*, 1980. Auctioned by Sotheby's in April 2022 for HKD 504,000 (USD\$64,000).

reveal subtle gradations in tonality, a technique sometimes referred to as colour processing. Visually impactful, these works capture the spirituality of the horizon, inviting contemplation and reflection.

Working with print at STPI reminded Soedarsono of his early career, when he produced woodcut prints for political work in the Indonesia Revolution for freedom. In the 1940s, he had been an active member of the Seniman Indonesia Muda (SIM, Young Indonesian Artists) and produced propaganda posters alongside S. Soedjojono and Affandi.

At STPI, Soedarsono revelled in pushing his boundaries. His remarkable ability to blend aspects of color to visualise abstraction and explore their relationship with one another, personified the colour on the paper.

STPI notes that his residency resulted in intensive explorations of colour, producing an exhilarating and spiritual experience for the artist as well as for the collaborators, many of whom remain part of the team today. After the prints' initial completion, Soedarsono revisited them multiple times, thereby refining the outcome to perfection.

Of his experience at STPI, Soedarsono wrote: “I gained value, spiritually, by this experience, and I believe this also added a new colour to my art.”

Soedarsono is survived by his wife Farida and three children.

Srihadi Soedarsono's works can be found across the region and the world, including one that graces the United Nations headquarters. He will be remembered as a prolific artist and unrivalled colourist whose life and work spanned Indonesia's transition from colonial territory to independent nation. His legacy is indelibly imbued with spirituality, mysticism and colour. ■

SEEMA DEVITRE is a docent at STPI and IHC, loves reading, dancing and travel. Originally from Ohio, Seema studied Modern Dance at CWRU and has been living in Singapore for 14 years.

ISLAND NOTES

Golden Birds

DARLY FURLONG SINGS THE PRAISES OF THESE TWO SINGAPORE SONGBIRDS

Paintings by Yusoff Abdul Latiff.

The next time you are in a park, look out for bright flashes of golden yellow among the shrubs and trees. You might just spot an olive-backed sunbird (*Cinnyris Jugularis*) or black-naped oriole (*Oriolus Chinensis*), both commonly found in Singapore.

Both are songbirds and were once shortlisted for the coveted title of Singapore's national bird. However, they ultimately lost that race to the crimson sunbird.

Olive-backed sunbirds can be found from Africa to Australasia. They are equally happy in both dense forests and open spaces and are tolerant of human habitation, so can be found nesting in urban areas too. Sunbirds have big, curved beaks that allow them to scoop the nectar from flowers and are often mistaken for hummingbirds.

Sunbirds are small (11 centimetres) with vivid yellow bodies, olive backs and brownish wings. Like many bird species, they display sexual dimorphism – the adult males have glossy dark throats and chests to attract mates. During mating season, the male engages in an elaborate courtship ritual. It makes loud calls, flutters its unfolded wings, turns its breast tufts out, and moves vigorously from side to side while attempting to come close to a female.

Once mated, the female sunbird builds a pouch-shaped nest made of grass, leaves and spiderwebs. She lays one or two greenish blue eggs that hatch within a week. Both parents feed their chicks by regurgitating nectar, small insects, ants, and spiders.

MASKED RAIDERS OF SINGAPORE

Black-naped orioles can be found in gardens, parks and the edges of forests throughout Southeast Asia. Orioles are a symbol of peace and joy in general. A visit from one is a sign of better days ahead.

At 27 centimetres, black-naped orioles are double the size of olive-backed sunbirds. Male orioles are bright yellow with a distinctive black band across their eyes and down their napes, making them look like masked superheroes. Their

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



A male black-naped oriole.



A female olive-backed sunbird. Males have a glossy dark throat and chest.

black wings and tail are a striking contrast against their bright yellow plumage. Females have a greenish tinge on their backs and no eye black band.

Orioles breed in Indochina and migrate to the north of the Malay peninsula in the spring. Males are known to court the females aggressively typified by high-speed chases around trees. Females build several cup-shaped nests before finally choosing one to lay eggs in. The pretty pink eggs hatch within two weeks. Many do not know that orioles are skilled nest raiders. They snatch the young of smaller birds to feed their own chicks.

The sunbirds and orioles are beloved birds in Singapore and were featured on the \$20 and \$500 bank notes released by the Monetary Authority of Singapore between 1976 and 1984. Both birds have also featured on numerous postage stamps in Singapore as well as Singapore-Malaysia joint issues. 📷

YUSOFF ABDUL LATIFF is a watercolour artist based in Singapore. Check out his work on Instagram: @yusofflatiff

FOM says THANK YOU to our *Batik & Bling* designers and boutiques for their generosity!

<p>THE MISSING PIECE</p> <p>TMP Studio @ Chuny Court 501 Bukit Timah Rd, #03-05, (s)259760 iwantthemissingpiece.com @iwantthemissingpiece</p>	<p>LAICHAN</p> <p>IG: laichan_official</p>	<p>Rumah Kim Choo</p> <p>https://www.tiktok.com/@kimchookuehchang 111 E Coast Rd, #109, Singapore 428801</p>
<p>KIAHS</p> <p>IG @kiahsgallery 71 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198496</p>	<p>BAJU BY ONIATTA</p> <p>IG: bajubyoniatta</p>	<p>aNERDstore</p> <p>www.nerdstorebatik.com IG: aNERDstore, FB: batiknerdstore. aNERDstore @ The Green Collective, 107 North Bridge Rd, #02-18 Funan</p>
<p>Rattanah</p> <p>23 Bussorah Street</p>	<p>YEOMAMA batik</p> <p>Shop online: yeomamabatik.com Studio is open Thu-Sat, 2-7pm. Visit us at 65 Ubi Road 1 #01-87 Oxley Bizhub, Singapore 408729 Follow us on Instagram and Facebook!</p>	<p>TRILOGIE</p> <p>https://trilogie.com/ The Emporium 171 E Coast Rd, Singapore 428877</p>

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION MEET

BATIK & BLING

Scan this QR code to watch the **BATIK & BLING** fashion video featuring FOM volunteers.

Or go to:
<https://vimeo.com/699279420>

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Baju by Oniatta @Galeri Tokokita

Laichan

DARLENE KASTEN REPORTS ON FOM'S VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION MEET 2022

Photos by the author.

Once a year FOM sets aside a day to celebrate its active docents and activity committee members. This year's Volunteer Appreciation Meet (VAM), organised as seven socially responsible gatherings, was held on 12 April at the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC). Special guests included NHB Chief Executive Ms Chang Hwee Nee and Director of Education and Outreach Ms Wai Yin Pryke. Ms Chang prepared a short video played at each meet recognising the contributions made by FOM.

The theme of the day was *Batik & Bling*. Guests had front row seats for a fashion show video montage in the auditorium featuring familiar faces wearing a range of contemporary designs from nine Singaporean shops and designers that celebrate batik and other regional motifs.



Kiah's Gallery

Thank you to our "super" models: Aditi Kaul, Charlotte Dawson, Christine Zeng, Clara Chan, Dobrina Boneva, Gisella Harrold, Irina Grishaeva, Laura Yung, Lynelle Barrett, Manisha Sanadhya, Mathangi Venkatesh, May Hui, Michelle Hertz, Miho Tajimi, Millie Phuah, Oksana Kokhno, Olesya Belyanina, Philippa Johnson, Priya Seshadri, Rosalie Kwok, Sadiyah Shahal, Simone Lee, Susan Fong, Talia Webb, Tenzin Dolkar, Thet Thet Han, Hafiz Rashid, Roderick Kow, Tim Clark, and William Ngoh.

And thank you to our generous designers: Goh Lai Chan of Laichan, Oniatta Effendi of Baju by Oniatta at Galeri Tokokita, Raymond Wong of Rumah Kim Choo, Fock Ee-Ling of The Missing Piece, Desleen Yeo of YeoMama Boutique, Sylvia Lim of Triologie at The Emporium, Tony Sugiarta of aNERDstore, Yati Hairi of Kiah's Gallery, and Ratianah



NHB Chief Executive Chang Hwee Nee with FOM President Millie Phuah.



Triologie @The Emporium



Rumah Kim Choo



The Missing Piece

Tahir of Ratianah's Boutique. See something you liked? Then please refer to the designer's contact details and patronise them.

While in the auditorium, we also had an opportunity to try our hands at a "cold batik" craft produced by Tony Sugiarta of aNERD Store. And there was a fun group game activity created by Christine Zeng in MHC's *Cerita* special exhibition galleries too.

More than one hundred members earned serious bling in the form of service pins acknowledging significant years as active volunteers. Notable were a 15-year pin earned by Ellen Rosenkranz and a 20-year pin awarded to Uchu Riza.



YeoMama Batik

FOM President Millie Phuah presented the prestigious 2022 Salome de Decker award to Tan Shook Fong for her more than fifteen years of service as a docent at ACM, NMS, MHC, SYSNMH, SAM, IHC and TPM. The FOM Council had a tough job this year making a choice from a number of very worthy nominations. However Shook's contributions as described by her primary nominator were the most compelling, and the fact that it was supported by another three of her fellow FOM members helped to make her nomination stand out.

Guests were invited to wear something batik or batik-inspired. Who showcased batik with a unique sense of style? *Batik Fashionistas* were Sadiyah Shahal (Modest Fashionista), Laura Yung (Glamour Girl), Clara Chan (Classic Elegance), Yitpeng Ong (Baju Dreams), Tania Leger (Modern Elegance), Hyunseung Suh (Batik Caftan), Lena Koh (Sarong Kebaya), Rosalind Tan (Boho Batik), Lynelle Barrett (Steampunk Sarong), and a tie: Abha Kaul and Shivani Kulpati (Sari Not Sorry). *Batik Fashionistas* were Kelvin Leong (Cool Operator),



The Salome de Decker Award winner Tan Shook Fong (right) with last year's recipient, Sim Chong Teck.

and a triple tie: Ratnam Ganesh, William Ngoh and Roderick Kow (Distinguished Dudes).

The choice of location also gave us a chance to celebrate MHC, FOM's Malay "Grande Dame", before she closes for a well-deserved refresh. Situated on the grounds of the former Istana surrounded by the Kampong Gelam precinct, the centre acts as a vital heritage institution for the Malay community in Singapore. This was especially true on VAM day which took place during Ramadan when the annual Kampong Gelam Hari Raya bazaar literally rocked up to the Kandahar Street entrance to MHC. Make it a point to visit MHC's permanent galleries this year and catch the *Cerita* special exhibition, which runs through the end of July.

In keeping with the observance of Ramadan, no food or drink were consumed, but guests took away a halal savoury and sweet provided by award-winning Rasel Catering, and dried fruit snacks generously donated by Nilofar Iyer of Parched Snacks.

Finally, special thanks go to Angie Ng for her dazzling *Batik & Bling* logo design, volunteers Oksana Kokhno, Lynelle Barrett, Jariyah Yusoff and Katherine Lim, the MHC docent community, and May Hui who generously donated vials of gelam tree oil as an appreciation gift for the 38 volunteers who helped make the day run so smoothly. As Singapore continues to further ease its gathering restrictions, we're looking forward to next year's celebration when our active FOM members can once again gather together as one big happy family.



aNERDstore



Ratianah's Boutique

NEW DOCENTS JOIN THE RANKS

CHARLOTTE DAWSON CONGRATULATES FOM'S 2022 DOCENT TRAINING GRADUATES

On behalf of FOM, Aditi and I send the cohorts from ACM, IHC, NMS and SYSNMH the heartiest of congratulations upon completing your docent training programmes! This was a unique year, coming on the heels of a Covid-forced break then constantly adapting to changing regulations as time marched forward. You are a versatile and dedicated group of individuals whose shared passion for learning have led to this moment. We do believe that the experiences of your docent training programme are best summed up by your fellow cohort members. Welcome to the FOM docent community!



Be it shipwrecked treasures or ceremonial daggers, let these new docents thrill you with stories from the Asian Civilisations Museum.

ACM

"The course has been both demanding and rewarding. With the friendly guidance of knowledgeable and supportive docents (who could give constructive feedback when required!), we have experienced a rich and varied programme offered by a broad range of experts and enthusiastic volunteers."

- BRIAN KNIGHT

"Training to be a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum has been satisfying in so many ways, some expected, others less so. The readings, presentations and guidance could not have been more thorough and enriching, and lots of creativity was poured into setting up opportunities for us to experiment with presenting the artefacts in new and varied formats. Each week it was a real challenge to absorb and pull-together the material introduced to us, but it was also just so exciting, and such a privilege, to immerse ourselves in learning about the region – its grand and ancient civilisations and material culture, that were immeasurably imaginative, dynamic and innovative, and remain so today!"

- NAOMI TINKLEPAUGH



Immerse yourself in Singapore's Indian culture with new docents of the Indian Heritage Centre.

IHC

"Being part of the Docent Training '21-'22 has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life. Relearning about my Indian roots and placing them in the wider context of SE Asia, as well as understanding the crucial role of Singapore at the heart of this region, has been a very rewarding journey. Going forward, I have a newfound respect for art historians and museum curators and the phenomenal role they play in engaging the community as well in safeguarding our shared cultural heritage."

- NEETU AGGARWAL

"During my shopping visits to the bustling precinct of Little India I would invariably be attracted to the sleek looks of a modern chrome and glass building. Later I learnt that the building housed the Indian Heritage Centre. On delving further, I learnt that FOM had a docent training programme for guiding at IHC. I promptly signed up for the training, and I must admit, I loved every bit of the training programme. Rama and Sukanya, our IHC coheads, did an admirable and amazing job. They kept us enthused and motivated whilst constantly juggling with ever-evolving situations. There were a few in-person lectures but many sessions had to be via Zoom. Thanks to valuable insights from some great guest lecturers, and gallery walk-throughs by the enthusiastic museum curator, Nalina Gopal, we were able to fulfill the requirements of a challenging programme. I would unhesitatingly say that training at the IHC has been extremely rewarding and fulfilling and has helped me hone my skills to become a good guide."

- JAYASHREE SRINATH



Step back in time and experience moments in history with these new docents of the National Museum of Singapore.

NMS

"Coming into docent training at NMS, I wasn't sure what to expect. As a younger man from overseas, I worried about fitting in with the group. Through this training, however, I have found that a love of history transcends all boundaries. On the one hand, the lectures and research projects have been incredibly interesting and fulfilling, making me feel a closer connection than ever before with Singapore. Beyond that, however, I have found the community incredibly welcoming and kind. This programme has given me irreplaceable memories of bonding with both my co-trainees and the training team over our shared passion for history. I would recommend the docent training to anyone who is curious about Singapore's past and enthusiastic about sharing that knowledge with the broader community."

- IAN CASH

"Being selected for the training programme was already a privilege. However, the engaging lectures and eye-opening field trips were the highlight of the course. As a Singaporean, they have helped me fill in the holes in the fabric of my understanding of Singapore history and left texture and colours in their wake. The multicultural friendships that I have made have definitely left an indelible impression on me of the scale and complexity of what it is like to live in Singapore and what it means to be Singaporean."

- GREGORY PECK



Explore this historic villa with the new docents of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and discover how the overseas Chinese diaspora influenced the 1911 Revolution in China.

SYSNMH

"The docent training I'm receiving at the SYSNMH has been absolutely enjoyable: Lee Chiew, Carlotta, Shirley and Tina have been tremendously helpful and generous in their guidance. I really appreciate the support provided for our learning - these ladies are always ready to stay and help whenever we have questions. And their passion for the subject matter is totally inspiring!"

- LAUREN KOH

"Although I have lived in Singapore for more than a decade, FOM docent training has given me a new perspective on it. Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall feels like a second home. Every artefact, every photograph, the story behind it has now become a part of me. I have a better understanding of the country we live in today. And talking about it fills me with a sense of pride. The training is intense but amazing, especially the people behind it. They have made the docent training journey fun and interesting."

- SHRADHA NAYAN

WELCOME TO THE FOM DOCENT FAMILY!

ACM

Aditi Mann
Alexandra Bauer
Laura Yung
Tatiana Carajilescov
Wynanda van Lynden
Alpana Singh
Aneta Kot-Hoffmaster
Angelika Kleffner-Riedel
Mohandas Menon
Rosalie Kwok
Alex Xinyun Cheng
Jyotsna Mishra
Kanika Bahl
Shin Jie Lee
Virginie Labbé
Alexandra Domart

Jane McDermott
Mathangi Venkatesh
Monica Yao
Brian Knight
Genevieve Bong
Hyun Joo Rossi
Jyoti Ramesh
Naomi Tinklepaugh
Wendy Tong
Hilary White
Latifa Amar Kungler
Shilo Menezes

IHC

Neetu Aggarwal
Balasubramaniam Muniandy
Neeta Menon

Aarti Jayaraman
Smita Mitra
Latha Ganapathy
Mala Krishnan
Jayashree Srinath

NMS

Akiko Lim-Dumas
Gregory Peck
Heike Friedrich
Hojung Park
Ian Cash
Janice Oh
Jo Kyungsook (Jamie)
Kim Dowoon (Dona)
Li Ching Wang
Mythili Devi SL

Rakhi Shankar
Srivalli Sastry-Kuppa
Woo Souyeon (Sarah)
Yenping Yeo

SYSNMH

Alice Chua
Chen Liu
Hoon Tor Shiang
Shradha Nayan
Evelyn Loh
Lauren Koh
Susan Fong
Tina Tan
Yolyn Ang
Stephanie Lyser

Explore Singapore!

Explore Singapore will take a break for summer. Programmes will resume in September. We have planned exciting tours and workshops - some new, some repeats - but can only determine the dates, closer to September. Do look out for announcements in MMLs, FOM newsletters, Facebook and Instagram.

All programmes will be conducted between 9 am and 11 am or 12 noon.

JAPANESE CEMETERY TOUR

This tranquil park with lush greenery and pretty floral arches is nestled in a suburban residential area. Not many people, including Singaporeans, know about this place, and many will be surprised to learn that it is the largest Japanese cemetery outside Japan.



Established in 1891, the Japanese Cemetery Park, was initially used to bury Japanese prostitutes (known as *karayuki-san*, meaning "women who have gone overseas") who died destitute in Singapore. Later, after 1920, as the Japanese community grew, people from other professions and trades were buried here. These include those involved in agriculture, retail and publishing. In addition, there are remains of World War II casualties and those tried for war crimes.

Over nine hundred tombs can be found here, with styles varying from the very raw and simple to ornate and elaborate, adorned with sculptures of Jizo (a Japanese deity) and western Corinthian-style columns. There are tombs of notable Japanese, with intriguing life stories, such as the sailor who became the first Japanese resident in Singapore, the Supreme Commander of Japanese Forces in South East Asia, and several others.

This tour will let you discover another little known part of Singapore and learn another aspect of its history.

PAINTED PRAYERS OF INDIA - THE ART OF KOLAMS

Through the ages, Indian women have been drawing *kolams* (geometric designs) at their doorsteps or in their courtyards as a welcome sign every morning. Traditionally they use rice powder mixed with water. Nowadays many have switched to commercially available dry coarse powder.



This form of art from South India serves three main purposes: a religious ritual, a social activity, and a channel for artistic expression for the commoner. It is an ephemeral art that is kept alive not in galleries, but in the common man's home. It is not meant to be permanent. Like life, it has to be constantly regenerated (the life of a *kolam* is usually just one day).

Join us to learn about *kolams* and its variations throughout India like the *Rangoli* in the North and *Alpana* in the East. Experience the joy of learning how to create these geometric designs on paper and discover the benefits it brings, such as improved concentration and creativity, amongst others.

SINGAPORE'S WILD, WILD WEST - KRANJI COUNTRYSIDE TOUR

Do you want to see a completely different side of Singapore? Then travel with Explore Singapore on a bus trip through the Kranji countryside. No high rise buildings to be seen - only peaceful, green farms and small holdings. Our first stop will be a farm growing wheatgrass, pea sprouts and various types of mushrooms. Then we will see a new way of growing vegetables in vertical farming. At the last stop we go on a guided walking tour through the charming Bollywood Farm. We end the morning with a delicious lunch of produce grown on the farm (included in fee), before we head back to urban Singapore.



LITTLE INDIA HERITAGE AND MURAL ART TRAIL - SERANGOON IN THE 1900S

The early 20th century was a defining period that shaped today's Little India as migrants from India, China and Britain settled in the area and established a diversity of trades and institutions. *Serangoon in the 1900s* focuses on the early settlers in the region. We will follow a trail through some of the most important locations including the Chinese Clan Associations, Sri Veeramakaliamman temple, Abdul Gaffoor mosque, Sakyamuni Buddhist temple and the Tekka Market amongst many more. Also highlighted on this trail are some of the modern beautiful street murals in Little India like the Mural of Traditional Trades of Little India by Psyfool.

Our guide will provide information on how many of the streets got their names as well as information about the cattle trade, race course and urban development that took place at the turn of the century.



#ACM25



of my time at ACM was the *FAITH BEAUTY LOVE HOPE* exhibition in 2020/21, because it demonstrated how objects (and the museum) can afford solace, comfort, joy and inspiration; and also because it celebrated the people behind the museum. People are the most important thing in the museum. Every day I'm here, I'm inspired and gain strength from the brilliant, passionate, professional people I have the privilege to work with: my colleagues, our docents and volunteers, our patrons, sponsors, partners, stakeholders. Here's to more faith, beauty, love and hope for ACM in the next 25 years."

FAITH BEAUTY LOVE HOPE was novel for an ACM special exhibition - suggestions for its content were crowdsourced from the ACM community! Pieces chosen for the exhibition were all nominated by individuals who provided personal supporting statements as to why their chosen piece reflected one or more of the attributes expressed in the exhibition's title. For instance, Kennie chose a 17th century *blanc de Chine* porcelain dish from the Dehua kilns in Fujian province. The lustrous white dish is part of the famed Hinckley Collection, one of ACM's most visited displays. Along with its delicate beauty, the dish, donated to the museum in 2000, has the distinction of being the first piece Pamela Hinckley and her husband acquired in 1969.

ACM's year-long celebration has only just begun. Look out on ACM's social media channels for a mini-series documentary that will bring you behind the scenes of the museum, the launch of unique ACM merchandise by local brand Supermama, and gallery rotations and special exhibitions that trace the museum's beginnings, transformations, and achievements through the years.

DARLENE KASTEN CELEBRATES ACM'S SILVER JUBILEE

Have you heard? Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) is celebrating its silver jubilee - and what a first 25 years it's been! Opened on 22 April 1997 in a former school on Armenian Street that now houses the Peranakan Museum, the ACM moved to its present Empress Place location in 2003 and has grown to become one of the world's most respected museums of Asian antiquities and decorative art.

For the last five years both museums have been under the creative direction of Kennie Ting. When asked to name a special exhibition that stands out in his tenure at ACM thus far, he was quick to say, "The highlight because it demonstrated how objects (and the museum) can afford solace, comfort, joy and inspiration; and also because it celebrated the people behind the museum. People are the most important thing in the museum. Every day I'm here, I'm inspired and gain strength from the brilliant, passionate, professional people I have the privilege to work with: my colleagues, our docents and volunteers, our patrons, sponsors, partners, stakeholders. Here's to more faith, beauty, love and hope for ACM in the next 25 years."

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MUSEUM DIRECTORY AND EXHIBITIONS

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

COMPILED BY DURRIYA DOHADWALA

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

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

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



FOM guided tours:
Please consult the museum's website at www.nhb.gov.sg/acm/whats-on/tours/daily-guided-tours.

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.

Batik Kita: Dressing in Port Cities (17 June - 2 October 2022)

Batik Kita will feature pieces from ACM's National Collection as well as from private collectors of batik that tell stories about making, wearing, and trading batik cloths. Local perspectives and connections will be featured as an important part of this batik story, from the timeless sarong kebaya and batik shirts that have become statement-making fashion pieces, to the iconic uniform of SIA flight attendants.

CHANGI CHAPEL AND MUSEUM



1000 Upper Changi Road North, Singapore 507707
Tel: 62142451 / 62426033
www.nhb.gov.sg/changichapelmuseum

Opening Hours:
Closed on Mon except Public Holidays
Tues - Sun: 9:30 am - 5:30 pm

FOM guided tours: Fri, 11:00 am

The newly revamped Changi Chapel and Museum (CCM) features new content and artefacts presented in an intimate and engaging format to tell the story of the prisoners of war and civilians interned in Changi prison camp during the Japanese Occupation. As part of the revamp, the National Museum of Singapore which manages CCM has been collecting stories and personal objects from families of former internees that emphasise their personal experiences. The museum's narrative is centred on remembrance and reflection, encouraging visitors to contemplate both the hardships that the internees underwent, as well as their courage and resilience in the face of difficulties.

GILLMAN BARRACKS

9 Lock Road, Singapore 108937
www.gillmanbarracks.com



Opening hours: Tues - Sun - Refer to individual gallery pages online for opening hours.
Closed Mon and Public Holidays.

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.

INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

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

Closed on Mon
Opening Hours: Tues - Thurs 10:00 am to 7:00 pm
Fri and Sat 10:00 am to 8:00 pm
Sun and Public Holidays 10:00 am to 4:00 pm

FOM guided tours:
Tues to Fri
Please consult the centre's website at www.indianheritage.gov.sg/en/visit/guided-tours.



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.

MALAY HERITAGE CENTRE

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

Opening hours:
Tues - Sun 10:00 am to 6:00 pm (last admission 5:30 pm), closed on Mon

FOM guided tours:
Please consult the centre's website at www.malayheritage.gov.sg/en/visit#Free-Guided-Tours.



The Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) provides wonderful cultural exposure and learning opportunities for visitors of all ages and interests. Situated amidst the Istana Kampong Gelam, Gedung Kuning and the surrounding Kampong Gelam precinct, the Centre acts

as a vital heritage institution for the Malay community in Singapore. Through its exhibits, programmes and activities, the Centre hopes to honour the past while providing a means for present-day expression.

CERITA (STORIES) SPECIAL EXHIBITION (Until 31 July 2022)

Envisioned more as a pit-stop on a journey that will continue after the planned museum revamp, this exhibition is a timely occasion for all of us to reflect on the past and imagine the future together. Cerita shines the spotlight on the shared stories as well as the role of the storyteller via a survey of selected artefacts and signature collaborations that MHC has presented over the past decade.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

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

Opening hours:
Daily 10:00 am - 7:00 pm

FOM guided tours:
Please consult the Museum's website at www.nhb.gov.sg/nationalmuseum/visitor-information/nmsquicklinkretailvenue rental/guided-tour.



The National Museum of Singapore is the nation's oldest museum that seeks to inspire with stories of Singapore and the world. Its history dates to 1849, when it opened on Stamford Road as the Raffles Library and Museum.

Dislocations: Memory & Meaning of the Fall of Singapore, 1942 (Until 31 July)

Dislocations: Memory and Meaning of the Fall of Singapore, 1942 is a commemorative exhibition to mark the 80th anniversary of the British Surrender to the Imperial Japanese Army in Singapore on 15 February 1942.

It features a blend of physical objects, documents and oral histories woven into specially designed spaces meant to evoke reflections and conversations among visitors, as they explore the notion of "war memory" and the different ways it can be remembered and retold.

NUS MUSEUM, NUS CENTRE FOR THE ARTS

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

Free admission

Opening hours:
Tues - Sat 10:00 am - 6:00 pm, Closed on Sun and Public Holidays.
Monday: Visits by appointment for schools/faculties only.

Fistful of Colours: Moments of Chinese Cosmopolitanism

(Until 31 December 2022)
Fistful of Colours: Moments of Chinese Cosmopolitanism brings together artworks from the late Qing Dynasty to the present moment to explore the social history of art, with a particular emphasis on the situatedness of Chinese ink works amidst its political milieus. With reference to the concept of Chinese cosmopolitanism as proposed by scholar Pheng Cheah, the exhibition connects the artistic and scholarly advocacy embodied by the artists presented, telling a story of the social life between artists and society through both modern and contemporary experiences of the overseas Chinese intellectual and mercantile communities, their pursuits of Chinese modernity, and their collective cultural commitments at the dawn of globalisation.

NUS BABA HOUSE

157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883
Tel: 6227 5731
www.babahouse.nus.edu.sg

Guided tours Mon - Fri, 10:00am, online registration required

For opening hours and guided tour information, visit the NUS Baba House website at babahouse.nus.edu.sg/plan-your-visit. For enquiries, email: babahouse@nus.edu.sg.



Conceived as a heritage house facilitating research, appreciation and reflection of Straits Chinese history and culture, the NUS Baba House was built around 1895 and was once the ancestral home of a Peranakan Chinese family. During the one-hour guided 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

(Closed until 2023)
39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941
Tel: 6332 7591
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.

SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555
Tel: 6332 3222
www.singaporeartmuseum.sg

The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) focuses on international contemporary art practices, specialising in Singapore and Southeast Asia.



The main building of the museum (located along 71 Bras Basah Road) is currently closed to prepare it for its next phase of development. While we wait, SAM is not missing in action but a Museum In Action: bringing art experiences into everyday spaces around Singapore and actively collaborating with partners and communities.

SAM AT TANJONG PAGAR DISTRI PARK

Opening hours:
Daily 10:00 am - 7:00 pm.
SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark is the museum's new contemporary art space with opening exhibitions by The Observatory, Korakrit Arunanondchai and Gan Siang King. Find out more at <https://www.bit.ly/SAM-MuseumInAction>.

Superfluous Things: Paper (Until 14 August)
How do artists think through paper? In an increasingly digital world, is paper still relevant? Superfluous Things: Paper is an interactive exhibition for the young at heart. This exhibition highlights the work of contemporary artists as storytellers, evoking precious personal and cultural memories, through a long tradition of paper manipulation. The works astound through the transformations of pieces of paper into objects of visual feast and irresistible emotional resonance.

Lonely Vectors (3 June to 4 September)
Lonely Vectors presents a series of artworks and new commissions that draw our attention to the fault lines, choke points, exclusive zonings and infrastructural politics that characterise our global economy. It will be showcased across multiple spaces, including local libraries and public hoardings, before coming back to focus on the site of the logistical warehouse at Tanjong Pagar port.

STPI CREATIVE WORKSHOP AND GALLERY

41 Robertson Quay, Singapore 238236
Tel: 6336 3663
www.stpi.com.sg

Opening hours:
Mon - 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:
For the FOM guided tour schedule, to learn more about STPI's public programmes, special evening tours, and programmes in Japanese, Korean, Mandarin and French, please visit stpi.com.sg.

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.

Second Movement (Opens June 11 2022)
For its 2022 Annual Special Exhibition, STPI presents a showcase of 41 works by 21 artists from its past two decades of creative collaborations. More than 100 artists from all around the world have participated in STPI's Visiting Artists Programme, where they explore creating works in print and paper making. Each collaboration with the workshop team is a testament to how these mediums can be endlessly reimaged and what can be achieved with print techniques. Second Movement invites you to get to the heart of what an STPI collaboration truly means, where new techniques, technicalities, concepts and philosophies constantly come into being.

SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874
Tel: 6256 7377
www.wanqingyuan.org.sg

Opening hours:
Tues - Sun
10:00 am - 5:00 pm,
Closed on Mon



FOM guided tours:
Please consult the Memorial Hall's website at <https://www.sysnmh.org.sg/en/visit/free-guided-tours>.

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.

Nian Hua: Of Deities, Guardians and Auspicious Art (Until 25 September 2022)
In collaboration with the Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, this exhibition showcases New Year prints produced in China from the Qing dynasty to the 1980s. A close examination of the iconography of these prints, which are deeply rooted in popular beliefs and folk customs, provides insights into the rarely documented attitudes and values of the common people in China.

Free general admission to all NHB museums for FOM members and one guest.

The KERIS WORE yellow

VINCE KASTEN SHARES HIS PASSION FOR DIVINE DAGGERS

Photos by the author.

As a lifelong collector of knives, I can confidently state that colour doesn't often come up in conversation with fellow collectors. Blade material, length or style are common subjects. But rarely, if ever, do you hear, "I really like this knife ... but do you have it in green?"

That changed when I learned that *PASSAGE* was publishing a "Yellow" issue. My wife Darlene and I had just completed a docent training lecture on the *keris*. That inspired me to take a fresh look at the small collection of *keris* I have accumulated since moving to Asia.

What did I see that fits with a yellow theme? Gold certainly, accenting the blade of a Majapahit era *keris*. Several of the *keris* have *pendok* (metal sleeve) made of brass. But what stood out is that many are wearing yellow!

Technically, the word "*keris*" refers to the blade only. The entire weapon includes a hilt, a scabbard, and other decorative pieces. The *hulu* or *ukiran* is the handle hilt. The scabbard consists of two joined parts: the *gandar* (the tube that sheaths the blade) and the *warangka* (the ornamental carved head of the scabbard).

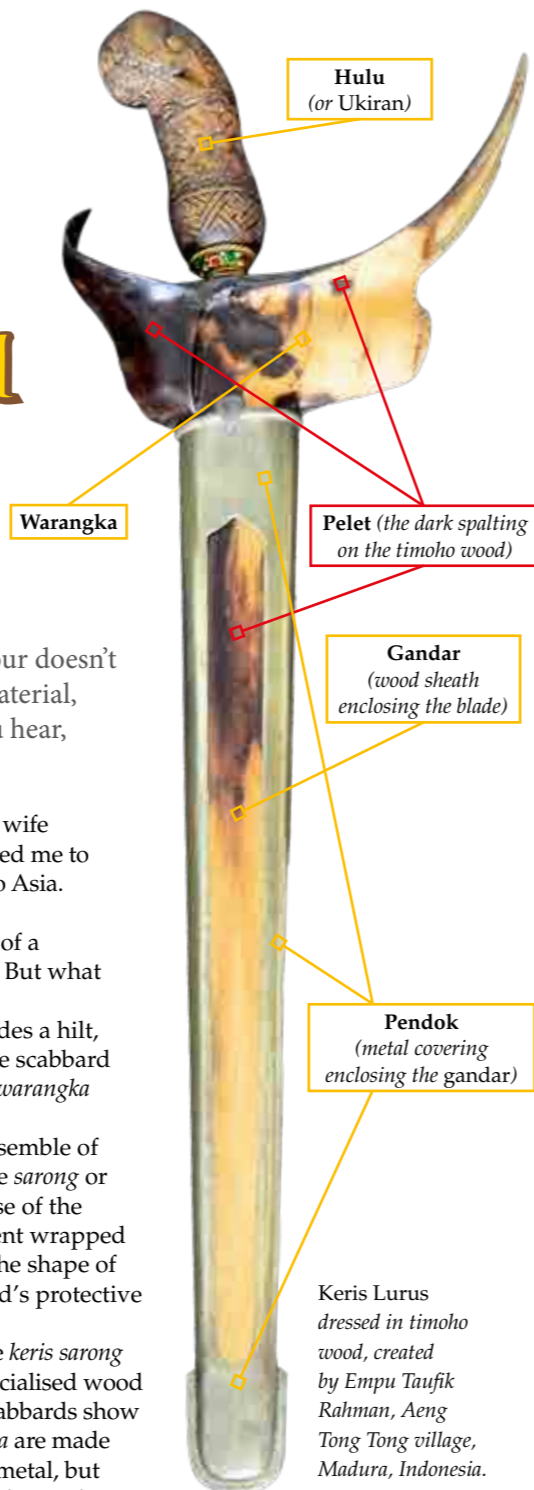


Six keris wearing yellow from my collection, ranging from Majapahit to modern era.

an iridescent grain pattern, named after *Putri Kuning* (Yellow Princess) in the Indonesian folktale of Yellow Flower. The *keris* in the main photo is dressed from head to toe in timoho and brass. The timoho *warangka* is accompanied by a *gandar* also in timoho, which is wrapped in *Blewahan* or *Slorok* style *pendok* that shows off the *gandar*. We see from the two photos that yellow is actually a common theme in *keris*, largely because timoho and kemuning are particularly desirable woods that are sought after by woodcarvers for the *keris sarong*.

All of which means it is possible that in the future, I could say to a *keris* seller, "I really like this *keris* ... but do you have it in yellow?"

VINCE KASTEN has been fascinated with the *keris* since childhood. Moving to Singapore has given him the chance to meet active *keris* makers in the region and acquire a small collection of both new and old *keris*.



Keris Lurus dressed in timoho wood, created by Empu Taufik Rahman, Aeng Tong Tong village, Madura, Indonesia.

YELLOW OUTLINE
A PART OF THE KERIS SARONG

RED OUTLINE
CHARACTERISTIC OF TIMOHO WOOD

Keris collectors call this ensemble of *hulu*, *warangka*, and *gandar* the *sarong* or the clothes of the *keris*. The use of the word *sarong* (a tubular garment wrapped around the hips) is a nod to the shape of the sheath and to the scabbard's protective and decorative role.

The most visible part of the *keris sarong* is the *warangka*, where the specialised wood carvers who make the *keris* scabbards show off their craft. Special *warangka* are made from ivory, bone, or precious metal, but the majority of *keris* are clothed entirely in wood. *Kayu* (wood) used in a *keris* is intentionally selected for strength, beauty, symbolism, and magical power.

Two of the most prized *kayu* appear in my photos. Timoho (*Kleinhovia hospita* Linn) is a buttery yellow wood with distinctive dark spalling, called *pelet*. Timoho is believed to be possessed by a spirit whose character is revealed in the patterns of the *pelet*. Kemuning (*Murraya paniculata*) is a warm honey-gold wood with

Friends of the Museums (FOM) presents MONDAY MORNING LECTURES June 2022

Currently all MML lectures are held online on Zoom. Lectures are open to FOM members only. Visit the Community Events page on the FOM website to sign up. Registration opens one week before the event. The lectures will begin promptly at 11:00 am. After this June talk, MML takes a break during the summer and will resume on 5 September.



6 JUNE WHEN CELESTIAL APSARAS DESCEND TO THEIR EARTHLY ABODE - TIME FREEZES!

Speaker: Dr Gauri Krishnan

In this talk, the role of celestial female figures, the Apsaras (celestial nymphs who are traditionally believed to originate from water) will be illustrated to explain their erotic, ascetic and heroic symbolism and to understand the meaning of their iconographic placement and purpose on a religious monument. Apsaras in Indian classical literature, art and architecture are portrayed in very diverse poses, ranging from boon bestowing motherly figures to alluring seductresses who were notorious for misleading legendary kings and holy men on their paths of righteousness.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr Gauri Parimoo Krishnan

Dr Gauri Parimoo Krishnan is an art historian, independent curator and museum consultant based in Singapore and India. Her major contribution as the founding curator is the development of the Indian Heritage Centre and the South Asian galleries of the Asian Civilisations Museum at their inception. Gauri had been Director, Research at the Culture Academy of MCCY, Singapore; taught Indian Art History at the National University of Singapore and Museum Studies and Curatorship at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Gauri is a recipient of the Commendation Medal and Public Administration Medal (Bronze) for her contribution to the arts and heritage sector.

Her major publications include *Naina Dalal: Cotemporary Indian Printmaker*, *The Power of the Female: Devangana Sculptures on Indian Temple Architecture*, *Ramayana in Focus: Visual and Performing Arts of Asia*, *The Divine Within: Art & Living Culture of India and South Asia*, *Nalanda, Srivijaya and Beyond: Re-exploring Buddhist Art in Asia*, and *Ratna Dipa: New Dimensions in Indian Art History & Theory*, essay in honour of Prof Ratan Parimoo among others.

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