PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

ISSUE I
FEB 2025

It's Elemental!

ART
HISTORY
CULTURE
PEOPLE

SAVE THE date

Swingin' Sixties!

FOM Volunteer Appreciation Night

Tuesday, 6th May, 2025

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ON THE COVER

A *Theyyam* performer, embodies the gods he worships as he jumps into the fire in North Malabar (Kerala, India) as part of a ritualistic enactment with dance, costumes and makeup. The intense heat and the fearless expression captured here show both the spiritual and dramatic nature of the *Theyyam* festival. Read about this and more in *Faith and Flames* (page 3) .

Image courtesy of photographer, Arun Hegde.

PASSAGE

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PRESIDENT'S BLOG

Greetings everyone!

A very happy and healthy 2025 to all!

New Council 2024 – 2025.

I am honoured to have been re-elected to the role of President. It's been a year of new learning experiences for me and I am grateful for members' full support. I look forward to working with everyone again and fulfilling my duties and responsibilities.

We will continue to affirm the work of our volunteers with our annual Volunteer Appreciation Night (VAN) on 6 May 2025. The theme is *The Swingin' Sixties* (get your groove on to celebrate 60 years of our Little Red Dot). Remember to update your profile online to make sure that we know all the contributions you have made to FOM and that our emails always reach you.

We are again honoured to have been awarded *Patron of Heritage* by the National Heritage Board who also acknowledged our members with 5-year, 10-year, 15-year and 20-year service pins.

At the Heritage Volunteers Appreciation and Awards 2024 are members of NHB's Education and Community Outreach Team with Lee Hong Leng. From left to right: Karen Goh (Deputy Director, Education & Community Outreach), Angela Yap (Asst Manager, Education & Community Outreach), Jasmine Lum (Asst Manager, Education & Community Outreach), Nurliyana Halid (Senior Manager, Education & Community Outreach), Nazihah Az-Zahra (Asst Manager, Education & Community Outreach).

We held our 21st Annual General Meeting (AGM) in December last year and are proud to welcome the new Council for 2024-2025.

At the AGM, we bade farewell to Michelle Lim, Honorary Secretary, whose unstinting support and efficiency kept us in line at meetings. We also bade farewell to Jyoti Ramesh for overseeing the management of volunteer data, and to Millie Phuah, our Immediate Past President, for her counsel and invaluable insight. We warmly welcome Heike Friedrich (Honorary Secretary), Jyotsna Mishra (Council Member for Activities), Andrea Baker (Co-Overall Head of Docent Training and co-opted Council member), Darly Furlong (Co-Managing Editor of *PASSAGE* and co-opted Council member) and Stephanie Lyser (Volunteer Data Management Officer and co-opted Council member) who graciously stepped up to the leadership roles. I am also grateful to Karen Ng (Vice-President), Linda Lim (Honorary Treasurer), Rupa Tamsitt (Council Member for Marketing), Larissa Wiegele (Council Member for Communications), Tabitha Manresa (Council Member for Museums), and Paroma Sen (Council Member for Volunteer Appreciation & Membership) for agreeing to continue in their roles. My thanks, too, to Shradha Nayan for taking on the role of Data Protection Officer. I look forward to working with all these dedicated women who are stalwarts of constant support and have been so generous with their time and talents.

In the new year, the Council and I look forward to discussing ways to forge new paths for FOM as we move ahead to meet challenges while continuing to offer a range of interesting activities and programmes for members. Even as we join in the SG60 celebrations, I am certain members will show our usual exuberance and enthusiasm in organising activities that mark Singapore's 60th year of independence (so young 😊). We welcome new opportunities to step up recruitment of new members to join our docent training programmes as well as our interest groups.

Here's to 2025! May it be a fulfilling year filled with peace and joy.

Lee Hong Leng
President
president@fom.sg

In issue IV (2024) of PASSAGE, this blog carried an incorrect photograph of the first day of docent training at Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). The correct image of the batch of ACM docents in docent training 2024/25 is presented here.

FROM THE EDITORS

Have any among us played *Rock, Paper, Scissors*? It's a simple yet clever game – each of the elements (rock, paper and scissors) symbolises a concept: rocks are strength, paper symbolises adaptability and scissors represent precision. They are all equally powerful though not always equally powerful against the same foes. For example, while paper overpowers rock, it is helpless against scissors, which is crushed by rock. Ultimately, the game is one of chance that not only delights but serves a purpose. A group of students may play to see who must ask the teacher for a class-wide homework extension. Siblings may play it to decide who must clear the table or walk the dog. Within FOM, two docents hoping for the same tour date may resort to this fast decision maker. Closer to home, two editors may play it to see which lucky one writes this column. It's a timeless game based on three elements: earth, wood, metal.

Melissa Nesbitt and Darly Furlong

But what if there were a game involving more elements? Consider the five elements in traditional Chinese philosophy: wood, fire, earth, metal, water. Like our three characters in *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, each element is capable of overpowering one and being overpowered by another. Wood penetrates earth, earth absorbs water, water extinguishes fire, fire melts metal, metal cuts wood. No one element is singularly superior, and like an infinity symbol, they co-exist in a symmetrical and circular chain, each one leading back to itself by way of interacting with all the others. In this way, these five elements symbolise harmony, balance and interconnectivity.

Inspired by this concept, we whisk you away on an elemental journey. Join us as we explore fire-walking traditions as acts of offering, purification and worship across cultures. Then tread the glowing embers to Cambodia where we will marvel at the serene Mekong River. Its majestic waterways served as the lifeblood of many nations and nurtured ancient Angkor civilisations. Dive into an article that unveils the spiritual and divine journey of the *kris* and other weapons of Southeast Asia, forged out of earth, water and fire. Discover the role of the Islamic world in transforming glassmaking into an art form. Uncover anecdotes of the practical and functional wooden clogs adopted in Singapore in the inter-war and post war years. Lastly, you'll find *zen* in the dry gardens of the Ryōanji Temple.

We wanted to kick off the new year with a theme that underscores the interconnectedness of FOM. While all these elements deserve their time, we endeavour to bring you a balanced array of 'elemental' articles. We close this letter with a special nod to wood, for this element will dictate our new year: the Year of the Wood Snake. Zodiac scholars will understand this to mean we are in for a year of transformation, growth and big opportunities.

Our second issue of 2025, *Chisel and Ink*, is fully mapped so we now turn our attention to our third issue, *Red*. The issue will be published during the SG 60 milestone celebrations and it's fitting that it will commemorate all things red, both physical and metaphysical. From the symbolic colour of valour and sacrifice to the red bean paste buns given away as wedding favours, from Jinrikshaws to cinnabar's role in lacquerware craftsmanship, we invite you to explore how this vibrant hue has gained symbolic traction in our society. Stuck for an idea? Reach out to us for some guidance and brainstorming. We welcome all our readers to consider submitting articles for this significant issue at passage@fom.sg

We are excited to see what the new year brings!

Darly Furlong & Melissa Nesbitt
Managing Editors, PASSAGE

FAITH AND FLAMES – FIREWALKING TRADITIONS

PAVITHRA KABIR EXPLORES FIREWALKING TRADITIONS ACROSS THE WORLD AND CLOSER TO HOME

THE DIVINE SIGNIFICANCE OF FIRE

Fire, one of the five elements that make up the material world, is sacred in many religions – from the sacred flames of Central Asian, Indian and Eastern faiths to the burning bush in the Old Testament of the Bible, the power and significance of fire in worship permeates across religious beliefs. Fire has the dual quality of destroying and creating and from time immemorial people have worshipped Gods of the sun, hearth and forge or have seen their own Gods appear as fire or with attributes of fire.

The burning embers and pit in the Nestinarstvo *rite in Bulgaria. Photo credit: Web article of Bulgarian magazine Vagabond.*

Along with using fire and light as part of worship, fire has also been used for purification and making of offerings. Furthermore, in some cultures, walking through a blaze of fire or on hot embers or stones has evolved over the millennia as both a testament of faith and a sign of purity. The written accounts of Pliny the Elder and Virgil talk of ancient Romans who walked on fire in honour of Apollo, the Sun God. Old Celtic festivals of *Samhain* and *Beltane* for the Celtic God, *Bel* ('the bright one'), comprise of the building of bonfires and people walk around the fire and leap over the flames.

Preparation of the fire pit for Paso Del Fuego *in Soria, Spain. Photo credit: web article on eyeonspain.com.*

A Spanish man walking on the coals carrying a child on his shoulders during the feast of San Juan. *Photo credit: web article on eyeonspain.com.*

Umu ti *firewalking in Tahiti; Photo credit: copyright Steve Kuo for Tahiti Tourisme website.*

FIREWALKING AND FIRE-DANCING IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

In modern times, Eastern Orthodox Christians in Northern Greece and Bulgaria perform the *Nestinarstvo,* a fire-dancing rite on the feast days of Saints Constantine and Helena (June 3rd and 4th). This festival is recognised by UNESCO World Heritage as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in Bulgaria. The festival itself blends older pagan practices with the worship of Christian saints and culminates in a fire-dance in the evening as a form of veneration of the two saints. People silently form a circle around the burning embers led by the sacred drum, and the *Nestinari* or Firewalkers, who are spiritual leaders through whom the saints express their will, begin entering the circle and treading the burning embers, dancing on them.

In the little village of San Pedro Manrique in Soria, Spain, on June 23rd which is both midsummers eve and the feast of *San Juan*, young men walk over burning embers, some carrying others on their backs in what is called *Paso Del Fuego*. *San Juan* or St John the Baptist is associated with fire and purification across European Christendom. While firewalking may not be done in his honour in other places, bonfires and wheels of fire are commonly lit for St John. This is not surprising, as the concept that fire purifies is one that is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Not only is God a burning bush and a pillar of fire that guides, but also in the story of Daniel of the Bible, the pure and faithful are thrown in a furnace and the flames do not touch them. Conversely, in the Christian faith, the wicked burn, be it at a stake or in the fires of hell.

POLYNESIANS – LIVING IN THE PACIFIC RING OF FIRE

Across the world in Polynesia, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, New Zealand and Hawai'i, islanders are joined by both the sea and the volcanic fires that erupt from within and worship them both. In many of the Islands, the people construct *umu tī* (earthen ovens) in which starchy roots are burnt under stones (often volcanic) to cook them. However, these

Buddhist monks at the firewalking festival - Hiwatari Matsuri, *at Mt. Takao in Tokyo, Japan, March 13, 2022. Photo Credit: REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon.*

A man walks through burning charcoal in the traditional ritual Lianhuo, *in Pan'an county, Zhejiang province. Photo credit: The Independent UK, News Article.*

A Theyyam *performer jumping into the flames in North Malabar, Kerala, India. Photo credit: Copyright Photographer Arun Hegde.*

ovens serve a dual purpose and there are accounts of firewalkers walking on the burning hot stones. The practice and reasons, from a test of faith to a prayer for a good harvest, differ from region to region as do the Gods in honour of whom the firewalking rite is performed. First practised in the eastern Polynesian Islands and dedicated to the demi-god Hiro, walking on the *Umu ti* is believed to have spread from there to other islands. Interestingly on the northern end of Polynesia in Hawai'i, the priests of Pele, the Goddess of the Volcano, also walk on lava stone with *Ti* leaves used to protect them. On mainland America, there are accounts of native American Shamans using firewalking for transformation and healing, though much of this knowledge is lost.

ASIA AND FIREWALKING – CHINA AND JAPAN

On the Asian continent, fire walking is seen across all the major religions. The Japanese have a purification ritual called *Ogoma*, performed during the *Hiwatari Matsuri* (Firewalking Festival) at Mount Takao every year on the second Sunday of March. This purification ceremony is a key part of *Shugendo*, a Japanese spiritual practice that blends Buddhism with ancient mountain worship and Shinto practices. Practitioners of *Shugendo*, called *yamabushi*, prepare a sacred fire and perform rituals around it, seeking to cleanse misfortunes and offer prayers for world peace, longevity and good health. The culmination of the ceremony involves the *yamabushi* monks walking barefoot across a path of embers, while chanting and praying. They are followed by worshippers who wish to try firewalking themselves. In a small village in China's Zhejiang province, the traditional *Lianhuo* or firewalking festival, involves villagers walking over burning coals in order to ward off evil spirits. In Tibet, firewalking is done by Lamas or Buddhist priests, who are thought to have adapted Hindu practices of fire worship.

Shiva Carries the Corpse of Sati, *ca. 1865–75, Khalighat Calcutta, India from the Met Museum.*

Sita (trial by fire), *by Jamani Roy, 1940, Calcutta, India from the Victoria and Albert Museum London.*

The Theemithi *Fire pit being prepared at the Sri Mariamman Temple in Singapore. Image courtesy of Mark Chan.*

FIRE IN THE HINDU FAITH

Fire is an integral part of Hindu worship and is used in many Hindu ceremonies and rites of passage, be it at birth, marriage or death. One reason is that Agni, the God of fire, is considered the messenger between human and divine realms, acting as the mouth of the Gods. The other reason may be that of all the five elements – water, fire, air, earth and wood – fire is the only one that cannot be polluted.

WHERE MEN BECOME GODS

In the Malabar coast of Kerala, India, fire is a significant element of *Theyyam* ritual ceremonies. The word '*Theyyam*' is a corrupt version of the word 'god' and the performer goes into a trance like state where he is believed to be transformed into living deities for the performance. Many mythical stories are performed during the *Theyyam* festival. In the *Kandanar Kelan Theyyam,* the performer becomes the warrior god, *Kandanar Kelan,* and in *Theechamundi* and *Ottakkolam Theechamundi* performances, the performer is Vishnu jumping into the fire, checking whether the demon, *Hiranyakashipu*, is hiding in there.

GODDESSES – A TRIAL BY FIRE

The concept of firewalking and purification by fire is also prevalent in Hinduism. Sati, the first wife of Shiva, sacrifices herself in the fire where she dies and is then reborn as the Goddess Parvati. Sita, the wife of Rama from the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, also walks through a trial of fire or an *Agni Pariksha*, where she comes out unscathed, thus proving her chastity. Similarly, at the end of the epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, exiled kings and the main protagonists of the epic, proved her purity by walking barefoot across fire and emerging unharmed. In Sri Lanka, there is a temple to mark the place where the Goddess Sita walked into the fire and in South India, Draupadi is worshipped as Amman, or a form of the mother Goddess and the fire walking is done as part of the *Theemithi* festival.

THEEMITHI AND THE CULT OF DRAUPADI

Theemithi or *Thimithi* originated in southern India but is celebrated not just by South Indians living in India, but in south Indian communities across the globe in Sri Lanka, Fiji, Mauritius, Reunion Island, South Africa, Malaysia and Singapore, where there is a large Tamil population. In Singapore and Malaysia, the celebration of *Theemithi* came from *Nagapattinam* in Tamil Nadu along with the community of caulkers, or boat workers, who formed the cult of Draupadi, venerating and worshipping the mythical figure of Draupadi as the mother Goddess Amman.

Theemithi itself means 'firewalking' and in the week before Deepavali, devotees walk across a fire pit invoking blessings of the Goddess Draupadi Amman. It is important to know that firewalking is but a small part of a larger ceremony that spans two and a half months. The festival starts with the invocation of *Sri Periyachi Amman* at the end of the Tamil month of *Aadi* (mid-July to mid-August) with a total of 18 distinct rites from Arjuna's Tapas and Aravan puja to a chariot procession depicting the *Krukshetra* battle and the *Padukalam* ceremony. *Padukalam* which means 'dying' or 'lying down on the battlefield', is an elaborate recreation of battlefield rituals on the day before *Theemithi*, that focuses on Draupadi, passes judgement on the Pandava and Kaurava casualties of war, determining whether they should receive salvation or damnation. Following this, the person acting as Draupadi measures out the length of the fire pit which is then prepared. On the final day devotees both Singaporean and Indian Hindus and even local Chinese Singaporeans, walk on the burning embers. Interestingly, in Singapore only men firewalk but in Reunion Island even women walk on fire.

In Lucknow, India at the *Bada Imambara* (Mosque), just ahead of *Muharram* (first month of in Islamic calendar), Muslims walk on fire to prove their loyalty and faith to Imam Hussein and they are joined by Hindus in solidarity. There are other accounts of Shiite Muslims in South Asia in Kashmir and Pakistan walking on burning embers, but little is known about the practice and its origins.

But this we know: humans across the world, spanning time and beliefs, are equally fascinated and fearful of fire. They have used it to test their courage, prove their faith or burn away their sins and will continue to do so. P

FOR FURTHER READING

Theemithi: A Look at the Full Cycle of Rituals Behind the Festival of Firewalking, Nalina Gopal; BiblioAsia 18, no. 3 (2022).

PAVITHRA KABIR is an FOM docent at the Indian Heritage Centre.

FEATURE

RYŌANJI TEMPLE AND ITS ICONIC ZEN GARDEN

STEPHANIE KOLENTSIS CONTEMPLATES JAPAN'S FINEST EXAMPLE OF *KARESANSUI*

All photographs by the author.

In Japanese dry landscape gardens, *karesansui*, the elements are reimagined. These gardens often don't look like gardens at all; there are no ponds, flowers, or trees. Instead, meticulously raked gravel or sand suggest water, while large stones symbolise mountains. Small shrubs and patches of moss add balance to these deliberate compositions. The effect is a sparse landscape where jagged peaks tower over a restless sea.

Nowhere is this more gracefully embodied than in the garden of Ryōanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Here, rocks rise from moss, like isolated islands in an ocean of stones. The distance between each element creates a sense of calm and invites quiet contemplation. It's no wonder this garden draws hundreds of visitors each day who come to admire one of Japan's most famous *karesansui*.

A partial view of the zen garden at Ryōanji Temple.

A SPACE FOR ZEN CONTEMPLATION

Karesansui gained prominence in the Muromachi period (1336–1573) alongside the spread of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Unlike other forms of Buddhism, Zen does not focus on scriptures or rituals; instead, it prioritises meditation and contemplation as a path to enlightenment. *Karesansui* gardens support this goal by offering space for peaceful reflection.

A wide-angle view of the rock garden.

At Ryōanji Temple's garden, visitors can experience this tranquillity firsthand. The carefully balanced arrangement of rocks, moss, and gravel invites stillness and quiet observation, fostering a sense of mindfulness and introspection.

Maintaining a Zen temple *karesansui* garden is also a mindful practice for the monks who care for it. Rain and wind can erase the wave-like patterns in the gravel or sand, requiring the monks to rake them each day. This daily ritual becomes a form of moving meditation, cultivating awareness through repetitive, intentional movement.

HISTORY OF RYŌANJI TEMPLE AND ITS GARDEN

Ryōanji Temple began as a private estate belonging to an influential family, the Fujiwara clan. In the 12th century, Fujiwara Saneyoshi erected a villa on the property which came to be owned by Hosokawa Katsumoto, a powerful deputy to the *shogun*, who converted the villa into the Zen temple in 1450.

In 1476, towards the end of the brutal *Onin* War, Ryōanji was destroyed. Not long after, Hosokawa died leaving his son to rebuild the temple in 1488. To this day, Hosokawa's grave along with that of his wife and son lies at Ryōanji.

The history of the garden at Ryōanji remains a mystery, with scholars debating who built it and when. Some say Hokosawa built the garden, while others say it was created

The abbot's residence, referred to as a hōjo.

Taking in the garden from the wooden veranda of the hōjo.

by his son. Yet other sources claim it to be the work of Sōami, a Japanese monk, ink painter, and landscape designer. Early descriptions of the garden from the 17th century describe only nine stones, rather than the fifteen seen today, so it's clear the design evolved. But we can confirm that the garden's design has remained unchanged since the late 18th century when the writer Akisato Ritō featured images of the garden in his book *Celebrated Gardens and Sights of Kyoto*.

EXPLORING RYŌANJI TEMPLE TODAY

Exploring Ryōanji Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a serene experience. Entering through the main gate, visitors are welcomed by a scenic pond. The foliage here reflects the changing seasons with golden and crimson leaves throughout autumn and candy-coloured cherry blossoms in spring. Up a cobblestone path lies the Abbot's Residence, or *hōjo*, which contains the Zen rock garden.

BEHOLDING THE GARDEN

The rock garden at Ryōanji, designed for viewing from the veranda of the *hōjo*, is a masterpiece of *karesansui* design. Fifteen rocks are arranged in five clusters, each bordered by moss. Yet from any vantage point along the veranda, only fourteen stones are visible; no matter where one stands, one stone always remains hidden. Some scholars speculate that only when a viewer reaches enlightenment will all fifteen rocks be visible. This arrangement of rocks emphasises the ordered emptiness surrounding them, making emptiness itself a central feature of the design. The composition creates balance through this juxtaposition of form and absence, giving the space its meditative quality.

Another important feature of the design is the contrast between stillness and movement. At first glance, the garden seems to be still and austere, but with time a subtle dynamism emerges. The rocks seem to propel themselves upwards, like mountains stretching above the clouds. The white granite gravel also creates a sense of movement; its meticulous lines flow across the space, with circular ripples around each grouping of stones. Even the moss changes with time, from a lush green to a reddish brown with the seasons, bringing life to the scene.

It's important not to overlook the garden's interaction with its surroundings. The earthen wall naturally weathers with age, while the trees above grow and change through each season. This subtle movement and change, within a space built for quiet meditation, remind visitors of life's impermanence—a core Buddhist teaching. Here, many find themselves falling silent, gently drawn into a contemplative state.

A close-up showing the contrast between presence and emptiness, stillness and movement.

A LASTING IMPRESSION

Ryōanji Temple's garden embodies the spirit of Zen, inviting reflection and contemplation. Its arrangement of rocks and gravel, designed to be viewed in stillness, speaks to the balance between permanence and change, form and emptiness. With each season, the shifting colours and the changing landscape remind visitors of life's impermanence. Many visitors are drawn into silence when they see the garden as if tuning in to its wisdom. Ryōanji's garden is a masterpiece that leaves a lasting impression of peace and introspection, resonating long after you've left. P

FOR FURTHER READING

Reading Zen in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden by François Berthier, *translated by Graham Parkes.*

STEPHANIE KOLENTSIS is an FOM docent at STPI gallery and creative workshop.

BLOWN AWAY! THE INGENUITY OF ISLAMIC GLASSMAKING

KERRYN SALTER ILLUSTRATES HOW ISLAMIC ARTISANS LEFT A LASTING LEGACY BY REFINING GLASSMAKING TECHNIQUES DURING A PERIOD OF REMARKABLE INTELLECTUAL, SCIENTIFIC AND ARTISTIC FLOURISHING

Goblet with Incised Designs with from kufic calligraphy "Drink! Blessings from God to the owner of the goblet". *Glass, bluish green; blown, applied solid stem and blown foot; scratch-engraved, Iraq or Syria, 8th – 9th century. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

Although Singapore's national collection includes only a modest selection of Islamic glass, the objects on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) offer a charming glimpse into the exceptional glassmaking innovations that evolved between the 8th and 14th centuries. This period saw the Islamic Empire – spanning the Middle East and North Africa, to parts of the Mediterranean and India – become a vibrant crucible for scientific, cultural and intellectual advancements. Islamic glassmakers, building on techniques inherited from earlier cultures, produced some of the most pioneering and masterful glasswork in history. Their creations – from lamps and tiles to flasks and coloured windows – enhanced the architectural and decorative fabric of mosques and cities and were prized domestic and ceremonial objects.

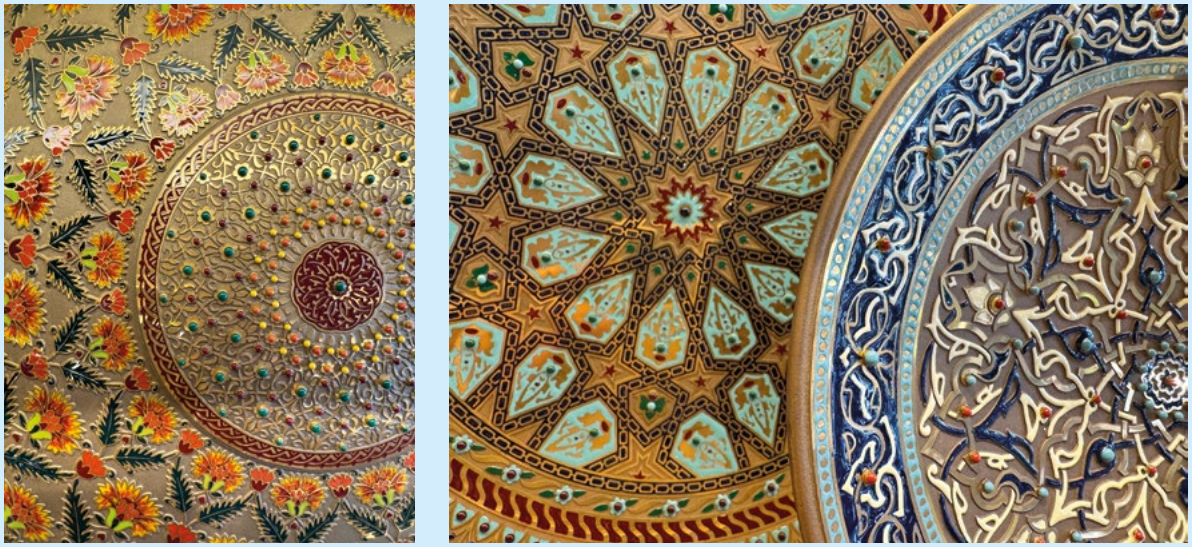
Glass krateriskos (unguent jar). *Egypt, New Kingdom, Amarna Period (18th Dynasty) 1353–1323 BCE. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

Funerary amulet depicting one of the Four Sons of Horus, Imsety; *cast glass, Egypt, Ptolemaic Period, 332–30 BCE Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

THE FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAMIC GLASSMAKING: DRAWING FROM ANCIENT TRADITIONS

Glass production likely originated in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia (Syria and Iraq, parts of Turkey and western Iran) around 3,500–3,000 BCE, where early glassmakers learned how to melt and manipulate molten sand with other materials. The basic ingredients of glass—silica (sand), alkali oxides (like soda ash) and lime (calcium oxide from limestone or shells)—were combined and heated to high temperatures (around 1,000°C to 1,100°C) in wood-fuelled furnaces. In ancient Egypt glass was primarily used for decorative items such as beads and amulets, created using cold glass, kiln based techniques like open-faced and lost wax mould-casting and the core-forming method.

Advances in knowledge of working with hot glass and producing raw materials with greater clarity and a broader palette of colours really took off in the late Iron Age, proliferating into Mycenaean Greece. By the 1st century CE, glassblowing had become a major production method, expanding both the variety of glass objects and the scale at



Gilded and enamelled glass shield and decorative plates; contemporary reproductions of Ottoman-style glass working, by Paşabahçe, Turkey. (Photos by author).

which they could be traded. After the fall of Rome, innovation in glassmaking slowed in the West, but regions including Iran, Egypt, and Syria continued to preserve and advance the craft. In the 7th century, with the rise of the Islamic Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate revitalized glass production. This set the stage for a golden age of glassmaking, later enhanced by the Abbasid and Mamluk dynasties, characterised by technical mastery, scientific innovation and artistic brilliance.

The Islamic Empire, at its height, was a nexus for goods, ideas and skilled artisans, facilitating cultural exchanges that influenced glassmaking across vast regions – from Spain and North Africa to Persia and India. These exchanges, facilitated by major trade routes like the Silk Road and the Mediterranean trade network, helped circulate advanced glass working techniques. Innovations born or developed in the Islamic world laid the foundation for Renaissance glassmaking in Europe and had a lasting impact on traditions in Venice, Uzbekistan, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia, North Africa, and Mughal India. Even further afield, Islamic glassmaking influenced *cloisonné* designs and glass traditions in Southeast Asia, also China and Japan.

ADVANCING THE CRAFT: REFINING GLASSMAKING TECHNIQUES

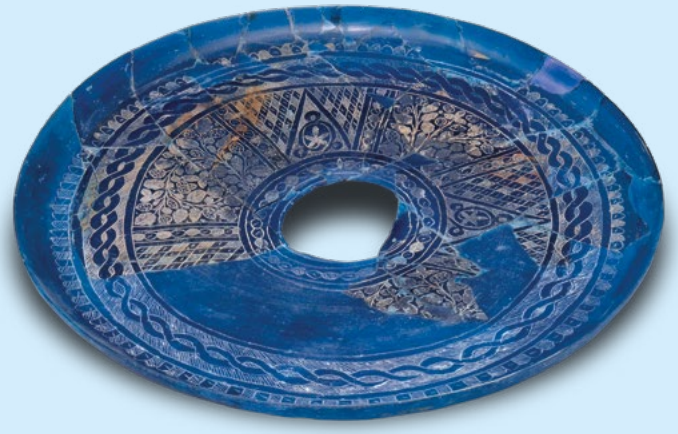
While Islamic glassmaking was deeply rooted in older traditions, it refined and expanded them to new levels of craftsmanship and creativity. Key innovations from this period include:

Free-Blown and Mould-Blown Glass

Although glassblowing and mould-blowing were well-established techniques by Roman times, Islamic artisans elevated these hot glassworking techniques to new heights. The forms, delicacy and artistry of free-blown glass, including fine-walled vessels such as bottles and flasks, improved significantly. The two main mould-blowing methods also saw refinement. The first involved inflating molten glass into a multipart mould, which was then opened to release the finished piece – after which, handles, lids, and designs could be added. The second, known as dip-moulding, involved dipping a round mass of glass into a mould to imprint decorative patterns before shaping it into a vessel by free-blowing and tooling. Both methods combined the speed and material efficiency of free blowing with the regularity of shape and relief decoration that moulds provided.

(top) Small Glass Ewer. *Blown green glass, applied handle and decorated with stylised vegetal scrolls added by trailing a thread of glass around the vessel. 11th century, probably made in Iran. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

(bottom) Blue glass bottle-vase or sprinkler: *mould-blown globular body and moulded five-petalled flower head, with a free-blown neck and coiled trail, Persian 12th CE. Image courtesy of Oriental Art Auctions.*



(left) Plate with Engraved Designs. *Cobalt blue glass with engravings, likely made in Syria or Iraq, 9th century CE. Found in Iran, Nishapur, of the same type unearthed in the crypt of the Famen Temple in China – which was sealed in 874). Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

(right) Fine wheel-cut flask. *Facet cut in a honeycomb pattern, referencing earlier Sassanian styles, Persian, 8th–12th century CE. Courtesy of the Collections of the Asian Civilisations Museum.*

Engraving and Relief Cutting

Islamic glassmakers revived and refined ancient engraving techniques for carving intricate designs into glass surfaces. Drawing on Roman and Sasanian glassmaking traditions and lapidary arts, artisans used tools like wheels, drills and diamond-set instruments to etch detailed geometric, vegetal and arabesque scrolling patterns. These designs were enhanced by the way light refracted through the glass, with blue glass often chosen for its resemblance to lapis lazuli and sapphire.

A particularly admired technique was facet-cutting, where glass surfaces were ground into flat or concave facets, often arranged in honeycomb patterns. Evolving from Sasanian practices, this method reached new levels of refinement in the Islamic world.

INNOVATIVE DECORATIVE TECHNIQUES

Mosaic Glass & *Millefiori*

Mosaic glass, particularly the *millefiori* technique, was rediscovered in the 8th or 9th century in Mesopotamia, likely for creating domestic items and decorative tiles commissioned by the Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad or Samarra. *Millefiori*, meaning 'a thousand flowers' in Italian, involved fusing colourful glass rods into delicate patterns like stars, spirals and flowers, which were then sliced into thin discs, placed in moulds and incorporated into decorative objects. *Millefiori* was not only a technical achievement but also a visual delight. Along with Roman mosaic traditions, the innovations of Islamic glassmakers in this field would later inspire Venetian glassmakers during the Renaissance, particularly those in Murano.

Stained (or Lustre-Painted) Glass

The technique of stained or lustre-painted glass originated in Roman Egypt and later re-emerged in Egypt and Syria between the 7th and 9th centuries. Despite its name, this method of glassmaking did not create a shiny, metallic finish. Instead, when artisans applied pigments containing silver or copper to glass objects and fired them at low temperatures, the pigments reacted with the glass, 'staining' it in shades of yellow, orange, red and brown. The intensity of these colours varied with temperature, with higher heat producing darker tones. This craft, along with export of clear and coloured glass panes, spread to medieval Europe, where it played a key role in the development of stained glass windows.

(right) Millefiori glass panels. *Archaeological site at the ancient port of Andriake within the ancient city of Myra, Antalya, Turkey, 5th or 6th century CE. Image courtesy of AA Photo, Turkiye Today.*

(bottom) Glass bowl in *millefiori* technique. *9th century CE, likely from Iraq, produced under the Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad or Samarra. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

(left) Footed cup with lustre decoration. *Probably Egypt, 11th or 12th century CE. Image courtesy of the Khalili Collections.*

(right) Stained glass window roundel with Susannah and The Elders. *Colourless glass, vitreous paint and silver stain, South Netherlandish ca. 1520 CE. Made in Antwerp or Brussels. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

Enamelled and Gilded Glass: The Pinnacle of Craftsmanship

By the 13th and 14th centuries, enamelled and gilded glass represented the zenith of Islamic glassmaking. This technique involved applying gold and enamel (powdered opaque glass) to the surface of glass objects using an oil-based medium with a brush or reed pen. The pieces were then fired at low temperatures, allowing the design to adhere to the glass without warping its form. Unlike lustre-painted glass, which absorbs pigments, this method produced brilliant and complex designs with gilded rims and borders filled with a rich spectrum of colours.

Enamelled and gilded glass was primarily used for luxury items – such as bottles, lamps, ewers and serving bowls – that fulfilled both courtly and commercial purposes. These pieces were often inscribed with expressions of devotion to Allah, and occasionally included rare inscriptions that provided clues about their provenance. Perfected in 12th century Syria, the technique evolved from Byzantine, Roman, possibly Celtic, *cloisonné* and inlay traditions. It reached its peak under the Ayyubid and Mamluk dynasties in Egypt, with Cairo emerging as the primary centre of production. Although the craft began to decline in the late 15th century, it was preserved by Safavid artisans, and its influence spread to Renaissance Europe, especially Italy.

THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF GLASSMAKING

Islamic glassmakers didn't just preserve earlier traditions; they elevated and transformed them, blending innovation with inherited techniques to create objects that were as functional as they were beautiful. As furnace technology advanced and scientific understanding of materials improved, artisans pushed the boundaries of what was possible with glass. These works were not only celebrated for their craftsmanship but also played a focal role in shaping glassmaking traditions around the world.

FOR FURTHER READING

Glass of the Sultans *by Stefano Carboni and David Whitehouse (2001).*

KERRYN SALTER is an FOM member and an avid ceramics collector who has been obsessed with ancient civilisations since childhood.

Mosque Lamp of Amir Qawsun *by artisan, Ali ibn Muhammad al-Barmaki. Blown colourless glass with applied foot, enamelled and gilded, Egyptian, 1329-35 CE. Image courtesy or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

Enamelled and Gilded Bottle, *featuring a phoenix and armed warriors on horseback, late 13th century CE, Egyptian, likely from Cairo. Greenish glass, blown, folded foot, enamelled and gilded. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

A TIMELESS REFLECTION: THE ENCHANTING MYSTIQUE OF *ARANMULA KANNADI*

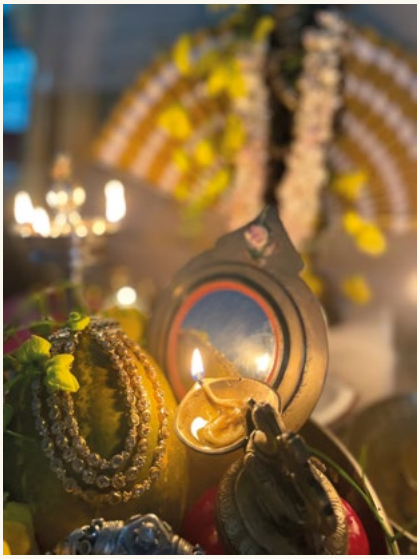
SMITHA SURAJ TAKES US INTO THE HEART OF KERALA, UNVEILING THE MYSTIQUE OF A METALLURGICAL MARVEL OF TRADITION AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Photographs by the author, unless otherwise specified.

Nestled in the heart of Kerala, the heritage village of Aranmula is home to one of metallurgy's well-kept secrets: the *Aranmula Kannadi*, a mirror of remarkable clarity and spiritual significance. Crafted by hand using a unique alloy, the *Aranmula Kannadi* is far more than a mere reflective surface; it embodies centuries of tradition, cultural heritage, and craftsmanship. This mirror, which is believed to reflect one's true self, continues to captivate both collectors and spiritual seekers across the world.

From early reflections in still water to today's glass mirrors, humanity has long been intrigued by its own image. Among the earliest metal mirrors, crafted from copper, are those from the ancient Harappan site of Dholavira (c. 2500 BCE), highlighting the skill of one of the Bronze Age's most advanced cultures. While this craft faded elsewhere, it endures in Aranmula, deeply woven into the religious and cultural life and zealously guarded by generations of artisans. Modern glass mirrors are created by applying a thin layer of reflective metal to glass, which causes the light to undergo refraction, distorting the reflection. In contrast, the *Aranmula Kannadi* offers a direct, undistorted reflection from its meticulously polished metal surface. Revered for its exceptional clarity, this mirror transcends craftsmanship, becoming a spiritual symbol.

Reflection of a lotus bud in a 25-year-old Aranmula Kannadi, renowned for preserving its flawless precision with age.



Aranmula Kannadi *in a* Vishukkani *setting, a cherished Malayali tradition marking the start of the new year and inviting reflection.*

A LEGACY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

The origins of the *Aranmula Kannadi* are steeped in legend. One popular tale links the mirror to the Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna, where the mirror's creation is said to have been inspired by divine intervention. When the deity's crown developed a crack, considered an ill omen, the king commanded a new crown to be made within three days. The craftsman's wife prayed and received a vision revealing the alloy needed for the crown. The resulting crown was a gleaming silver masterpiece, sparking the tradition of mirror-making in Aranmula. Known as *Kannadi Bimbam*, the crown was preserved in the temple until the 1940s.

Legends and history converge on the narrative that the artisans behind the *Aranmula Kannadi* migrated to Aranmula from Sankarankoil in Tamil Nadu centuries ago. Hailing from the Vishwakarma community, renowned for their exceptional metal-working skills, these craftsmen possess a deep understanding of metallurgy, passed down through generations as sacred knowledge shared only among their kin. Padma Shri Dr Sharada Srinivasan, a distinguished metallurgist at the National Institute of Advanced Studies suggests that the craft likely evolved from early copper-based mirrors, such as those found at the Harappan site and Iron Age sites like Taxila and Nigiri cairns. Dr Srinivasan notes that the *Aranmula Kannadi*'s true brilliance lies not just in the alloy, but in the artisans' skill, transforming a brittle metal into mirrors of exceptional clarity.

The Aranmula Kannadi, *gifted to the author on her wedding 25 years ago, reflecting the light from an oil lamp.*

CRAFTING THE ARANMULA KANNADI

Creating an *Aranmula Kannadi* is a laborious and meticulous process. The alloy used in the mirrors, comprising primarily copper and lead, is a closely guarded secret. The artisans begin by melting the metals in a crucible made from the alluvial clay from Aranmula. After the molten metal is poured into a mold and cooled, it takes the form of a rough mirror, which then undergoes a lengthy process of polishing and refining, gradually transforming into an object of exquisite beauty.

Frame in progress. Photo courtesy of Magic Mirror Handicrafts, Aranmula.

To achieve the mirror's signature shine, artisans use a variety of natural materials to buff the surface to a high gloss. Traditionally, it took six to seven days to craft a three-inch mirror, but younger artisans have managed to reduce this to just three days, maintaining traditional methods while increasing efficiency.

While the reflective surface is the primary focus, the frame of the *Aranmula Kannadi* is equally important. Like the mirrors themselves, the frames too are entirely handmade. As a result, no two *Aranmula Kannadis* are ever exactly alike, each one bearing the mark of the artisan's hand.

CULTURAL AND RITUALISTIC SIGNIFICANCE

The craft of *Aranmula Kannadi* flourished under royal patronage, thanks to a decree that mandated its inclusion as a vital part of *Ashtamangalyam*, the eight auspicious items for religious rituals, including marriages. More than a metallurgical marvel, the *Aranmula Kannadi* embodies the Indian philosophical principle of Tat Tvam Asi (Thou Art That), inviting viewers to look beyond the surface and reflect on their inner self.

For centuries, the *Aranmula Kannadi* was a prized possession among the upper echelons of Kerala. As centuries passed, the popularity of the mirrors began to wane with the shift in material culture. However, the mirror has become a sought-after collector's item in recent decades, driven by a global interest in traditional crafts and cultural heritage. *Aranmula Kannadi* was awarded the Geographical Indication (GI) tag by the Government of India in 2004.

Today, the demand for *Aranmula Kannadi* is growing, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. Artisans customize the mirrors with intricate, personalised frames, making them highly sought after by collectors and spiritual enthusiasts alike. Beyond its material form, it serves as a bridge between the physical and the divine, inviting introspection and self-awareness. It is said that this mirror doesn't simply find its way into your life—it arrives when the time is right.

As the world becomes more interconnected, the *Aranmula Kannadi* stands as a reminder of the importance of preserving traditional crafts. For those who welcome it, the *Aranmula Kannadi* is more than a reflection of the self; it is a symbol of resilience and continuity—a reflection of the past and a glimpse into a future where art, culture, and spirituality converge.

The Aranmula Kannadi *in* Ashtamangalyam, *the eight auspicious items used in religious rituals.*

FOR FURTHER READING

Srinivasan S. and Glover, *I.2007. Skilled mirror craft of intermetallic delta high-tin bronze from Aranmula, Kerala, available at https://bit.ly/3USYEtb.*

SMITHA SURAJ is a member of FOM and a professional photographer.

FORGED BY FIRE AND FAITH

HEIKE BREDENKAMP DELVES INTO HOW THE KHMER EMPIRE HARNESSED THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF FIRE AND WAX TO CREATE MASTERPIECES THAT BRIDGED THE EARTHLY AND THE DIVINE

All images are taken from the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

The kiln roars with life. Flames twist, lick and curl, their orange glow spilling into the dim workshop. Shadows dance on the walls as the heat radiates outward, warming the faces of artisans gathered in quiet concentration. In the heart of Angkor, the capital of the Khmer Empire, a young craftsman places his wax sculpture, encased in clay, into the fire. Hours of painstaking labour, shaping Vishnu's serene expression and Shiva's cascading locks, culminate in this transformative moment. As the wax melts away, it leaves a hollow space, ready to be filled with molten bronze.

When the metal cools and the clay shell is broken, what emerges is more than a sculpture. It is a sacred bridge between the divine and the mortal, a manifestation of faith brought to life through the alchemy of fire and wax.

Scenes like this played out countless times during the Khmer Empire's golden age, from the 9th to the 15th centuries. Deeply intertwined with Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Khmer artisans used art to express devotion. The lost wax method was at the heart of this legacy, an ancient technique that combined technical mastery with spiritual intent to create exquisite religious art.

TRACING A TIMELESS TECHNIQUE

The lost wax method, known as *cire perdue*, has a history stretching over 6,000 years. Developed in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, it travelled across continents, evolving with each civilisation it touched. By the time it reached the Khmer Empire, it had become a refined process demanding technical precision and artistic vision.

Beeswax, prized for its pliability, allowed Khmer artisans to craft intricate designs - flowing garments, serene expressions, and even the faint curl of a deity's fingers. Yet, this was no mere craft. As historian Robert L. Brown notes, "For the Khmer, the act of creation mirrored their spiritual beliefs – destruction, transformation, and rebirth were not just part of the process but a reflection of their faith itself."

FIRE AS A SACRED FORCE

In the lost wax method, fire was more than a tool; it was a transformative force imbued with spiritual meaning. It melted the wax, hardened the clay mould, and turned molten bronze into enduring works of art.

To the Khmer, fire resonated with their spiritual teachings. In Hinduism, Agni, the fire god, bridges human and celestial realms. As described in the *Rigveda*: "O Agni, bright and strong, lead us to riches and plenty. Thou art the guardian of Truth, the king of sacrifice."

For Buddhists, fire symbolises enlightenment, burning away ignorance to reveal truth. Vietnamese monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, beautifully described it: "The flame is not caught in the candle. It is free, and its light shines only when it transforms."

Through fire, the wax was destroyed but not lost, it gave way to something greater. This act of transformation was a profound metaphor for transcendence, uniting technical process and spiritual faith.

SCULPTING DIVINITY

The Khmer Empire's spiritual beliefs came vividly to life through the lost wax method. Artisans created bronze and gold statues of Hindu deities like Vishnu and Shiva, as well as Buddhist figures such as Avalokiteshvara and the Buddha. These sculptures were more than objects of beauty; they were imbued with sacred energy, serving as conduits for prayer and ritual.

The statue of Harihara, a fusion of Vishnu and Shiva, exemplifies this artistry. Cast with extraordinary precision, it symbolises the Khmer approach to faith – harmonising opposing forces. Similarly, bronze statues of the Buddha from the empire's later period reflect the transition to Buddhism, their tranquil expressions inviting moments of stillness and contemplation.

A DANCE OF PRECISION AND BELIEF

The lost wax method demanded a delicate balance of materials, temperatures, and timing:

Wax modelling: Artisans began with beeswax, carefully shaping it to capture physical detail and spiritual essence. Each curve, line, and feature was deliberate and imbued with meaning.

Creating the mould: Layers of locally sourced clay encased the wax model, forming a protective shell that could withstand the fire.

Firing the mould: The clay mould was heated in a kiln until the wax melted away, leaving a hollow cavity. This step required intense focus to ensure the mould remained intact.

Pouring molten metal: Molten bronze, often mixed with gold or silver, was poured into the mould. Timing was crucial to prevent air pockets or cracks that clould mar the final sculpture.

Polishing and gilding: Once cooled, the sculpture was freed from its mould, polished, and sometimes gilded to enhance its grandeur.

Art historian John Guy observed, "The Khmer artisans' ability to balance creative imagination with technical precision is a testament to their deep understanding of materials and their vision of art as a reflection of the divine."

Five-Headed Shiva: Transcendence in Form. *This Khmer bronze from late 12th – early 13th century Cambodia represents Shiva as Sadashiva or Mahesha, symbolising his transition from formlessness to material existence. With five heads and ten arms, this Bayon-period depiction exemplifies Cambodia's deep Shaivite traditions and rich sculptural legacy.*

Naga Muchalinda: Guardian of Ceremonial Processions. *This 12th – 13th century Cambodian bronze finial, shaped using the lost-wax technique, depicts Naga Muchalinda, the seven-headed spirit of waters. Each naga head bears symbolic chakras or lotuses, representing Buddhist teachings. These sculptures adorned royal palanquins in ceremonial processions, as documented in Angkor Wat's reliefs and described by 13th century emissary Zhou Daguan.*

Divine Family: Somaskanda *from Tamil Nadu. A Chola-period bronze from c. 1200, this sculpture portrays Shiva, Parvati, and their son Skanda, an embodiment of the ideal Tamil divine family. Uniquely crafted with interlocking pedestals, it deviates from the conventional single pedestal, showcasing innovation in South Indian bronze artistry.*

A UNIVERSAL CRAFT

While the lost wax method was practised globally, each culture adapted it to its own spiritual and artistic needs, such as:

India (Chola Dynasty 9th to 13th centuries): The Chola bronzes captured Hindu deities in dynamic poses filled with narrative energy.

China (Zhou Dynasty 1046 to 246 BCE): Ritual vessels and bells emphasised symmetry and ancestor worship, distinct from the Khmer's temple-focused works.

Africa (Benin Kingdom 13th to 19th centuries): The Benin bronzes depicted royal life and courtly rituals with bold geometric designs, focusing on political power rather than spirituality.

Museums like the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) bridge audiences with the rich narrative of this casting method. It holds in its collection artefacts like the Chola-era *Somaskanda* from Tamil Nadu and Khmer bronzes such as the *Five-Headed Shiva* and *Naga Muchalinda*, each celebrating the artistic depth and cultural exchange that shaped these masterpieces.

The *Five-Headed Shiva*, symbolises the transition from formlessness to material existence. With five heads and ten arms, this Bayon-period depiction exemplifies Cambodia's deep Shaivite traditions and rich sculptural legacy. The *Naga Muchalinda*, with its seven heads and symbolic lotuses, illustrates Buddhist teachings while serving ceremonial functions in royal processions. The refined detailing and serene expressions of these works reflect both the spiritual aspirations of the era and the technical mastery of artisans.

By showcasing these works, museums foster a dialogue that spans centuries of devotion, artistry, and innovation; celebrating ancient craftmanship and cultural exchanges that shaped regional art forms.

Lopburi Stupa: A Tale of Enlightenment. *This 12th –13th century bronze model stupa from Central Thailand features Buddha images with symbolic gestures, such as the earth-touching mudra, narrating Buddha's triumph over Mara. Inspired by Khmer art, it reflects Lopburi's cultural fusion and spiritual heritage.*

THE LEGACY OF FIRE AND WAX

Today, the lost wax tradition continues as a vital part of Cambodia's heritage. Modern artisans, inspired by their ancestors, craft sculptures blending ancient techniques with contemporary themes. Workshops in Kampong Thom preserve traditional methods while appealing to global audiences.

The National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh houses an exceptional collection of Khmer bronzes, offering a glimpse into the empire's artistic achievements. International exhibitions, like those at the Musée Guimet in Paris, ensure the world continues to marvel at the artistry born of fire and wax.

ETERNAL FLAMES

The lost wax method is more than an artistic process; it is a testament to the transformative power of fire, faith, and creativity. Through this technique, Khmer artisans turned fleeting moments of inspiration into enduring masterpieces, creating works that embodied devotion and transcended time.

Standing before these sculptures, their beauty and spiritual depth remind us that destruction can lead to creation, impermanence can give rise to permanence, and fire guided by faith, can transform the ephemeral into the eternal.

As historian Helen Ibbitson Jessup reflects, "The Khmer mastery of lost wax casting reveals a profound connection between the act of making and the act of believing – a legacy that continues to inspire and illuminate."

HEIKE BREDENKAMP is a docent at the ACM.

WONDERFUL WOODEN WORKWEAR!

GILL CRUIKSHANK PONDERS OVER THE VANISHED TRADE WHICH TRANSFORMED WOOD INTO WEARABLES

Clogs on feet: Detail from Yip Yew Chong's mural My Chinatown Home. *Photo taken by the author.*

AN UNEXPECTED PLACE TO FIND WOOD

Around the streets of Chinatown, you may expect to find wood within architectural structures: on the window shutters of a shophouse perhaps, or the elaborate carvings found in places of worship. But during the inter-war and post-war periods in Singapore, wood was commonly found in a more unusual location: on people's feet!

FUNCTIONAL FOOTWEAR

When we hear the words 'wooden clogs', our thoughts may drift to windmills, but unlike the famous Dutch footwear, the clogs found in Singapore were simple wooden platforms with a strap, that were much more suited to heat and humidity than a full shoe. In 1955, clogs were described in the Straits Times as:

"….shoes in their most elemental form, made in such a way that the wearer's foot rests firmly on the wood. Held in place by a rubber strap, they allow complete freedom of movement..."

Giant clogs on display at Haw Par Villa, illustrating the flat bridge-like side profile of a traditional wooden clog sole. The thick platforms kept feet elevated above wet and muddy ground. Wooden clogs were known as cha kiak *in Hokkien dialect and* terompah *in Bahasa Malay. Photo taken by the author.*

These shoes were very practical, hard wearing and inexpensive. The wooden soles were tough, light and non-slip, protecting the wearer's feet from wet, dirty ground and sharp objects. These elevated platforms were impervious to heat and moisture making them perfect not only for workers in wet markets and on farms, but also for kampung living, where muddy roads were commonplace. Clogs also found use indoors, in wet areas of the home – cooking in the kitchen, doing chores such as laundry or cleaning, and using the bathroom. Young and old wore clogs daily, making them indispensable in every household.

TRADITIONALLY HANDCARVED

Clog making was a highly skilled trade that was usually passed down from father to son, with an apprenticeship taking several years. The trade arrived in Singapore with expert migrants from China, who established businesses in their new home. It was also common for master tradesmen to take on young migrants as assistants or apprentices. Such was the popularity of this footwear that every neighbourhood and kampung had several clog-purveying shops, providing employment opportunities for new arrivals to Singapore.

The soles of clogs started their lives as trees growing in Peninsular Malaya or Indonesia, and the imported lumber was purchased by the cartload from peddlers. Rubber and Meranti timber were preferred for their lightness, but Durian wood was also a favourite. The first part of the transformation process was the strenuous sawing of tree trunks into blocks by the clog maker's assistants. Each block was then expertly hewn by the master, using an array of sharp cutting tools (with torturous names such as *the stock, the hollower* and *the gripper),* into one clog base. The heel and sole were the same height, forming a bridge-like side profile, and subtle shaping enabled the act of walking on these rigid platforms. Viewed from above, the outlines were different for male and female: a simple flattened oval shape for men and a more sleek, curvy hourglass for women.

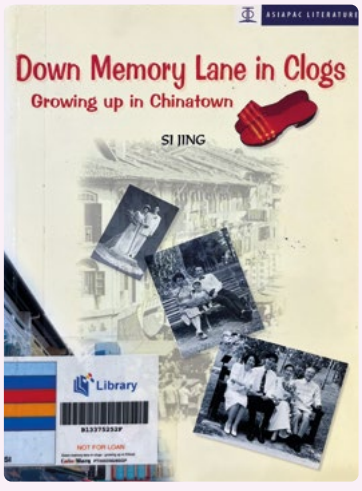
Illustrating the different clog sole outlines for male and female: a simple oval with flattened sides for men and a shapelier hourglass for women. Photo courtesy of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Once carved, the soles would be sanded smooth and painted by the assistants. Early versions were green for men and red for women, but later – to attract the ladies' attention – a wider range of dazzling colours were used, often embellished with charming floral designs and decorated straps. In Chinatown, numerous clog shops were located on Sago Street, Sago Lane and Temple Street, the latter utilising the sunny expanse of wall belonging to neighbouring Sri Mariamman Temple as a convenient place to dry freshly painted clogs.

The finished soles were stacked neatly on racks along the clog maker's shop walls, awaiting customers to arrive and select the appropriate size for their feet. Customers could choose from a range of designs, the cheapest being unpainted clogs with straps made from recycled rubber tyres. Alternative straps were made of leather or painted white rubber, and in later years, brightly coloured vinyl. Once the client had selected a clog and a strap, the master would cut the strap at an angle and nail this end to the clog, sandwiching a small sliver of black rubber betwixt strap and nail for reinforcement. The strap was then arched over the customer's foot and the other side lightly tacked in place, allowing a few steps to be taken – to gauge comfort levels – and for adjustments to be easily made. Once the bespoke fit was approved, the nails were hammered firmly in place and the excess strap trimmed.

FROM EVERYDAY WEAR TO FALL FROM FAVOUR

Wooden clogs were once the footwear of choice for the masses. Even the wealthy wore them at home, to keep their feet elevated and dry in the bathroom and kitchen. Their precipitous decline in popularity and final demise was not only because they were noisy, uncomfortable and cumbersome; other factors also contributed. Mechanisation of the wood carving process meant soles could be bulk bought directly from manufacturers, making the clog makers' craftsmanship unnecessary. During urban renewal and resettlement in the 1960s, many shophouses were demolished, neighbourhoods changed, and people were moved to new kampungs in the sky, lessening the demand for the durable shoe. During the 1970s the shoe making industry developed rapidly and factory production of a wide variety of comfortable, affordable footwear led the population to swap the click-clack of wooden soles for silent, rubber flipflops, making clog makers redundant.



Down Memory Lane in Clogs: Growing up in Chinatown. *Written by Si Jing (2002, Asiapac Books). The book recalls poignant memories of a Chinatown childhood during the 1950s. Photo taken by the author.*

The Clog Maker *postage stamp (illustrated by graphic designer Eng Tze Ngan) from the 2006 Singapore Post Vanishing Trades set of ten postal stamps, depicting trades once common in Singapore. Image courtesy of colnect.com*

REMEMBERING THE WOODEN CLOG

The red wooden clog has become a cultural icon, celebrated in literature, art and ancient tradition. In the book *Down Memory Lane in Clogs: Growing Up in Chinatown*, author Si Jing paints a vibrant picture of the clog trade during the 1950s. In 2006, the clog maker had a postal stamp devoted to his craft, as part of the *Vanishing Trades* set of ten stamps, featuring trades once commonly seen on Singapore's streets. Traditionally, bridal dowries contained two pairs of red wooden clogs symbolising prosperity and good fortune, although in modern dowry packages, they have been miniaturised into cute keepsakes. The full-sized, red wooden clogs are now strictly for overseas tourists!

Mural in progress: Yip Yew Chong's Clog Maker and Kitchenware Shop *at 25 Temple Street in April 2023. Photo taken by the author.*

The artist at work: Yip Yew Chong painting a red wooden clog detail. Growing up on Sago Lane during the 1970s, the humble clog was part of the backdrop to daily life for the artist, and features in many of his murals. Photo taken by the author.

YIP YEW CHONG AND THE CLOGMAKER

In April 2023, beloved local artist Yip Yew Chong completed the final mural in his *Dreams of Chinatown* series. Found at 25 Temple Street, *Clog Maker and Kitchenware Shop* celebrates clog maker Mr Lau who established his business at this address in 1948. Half of the shop was devoted to making and selling clogs and in the other half, his family sold kitchen utensils. When the demand for clogs dwindled in the 1980s, Mr Lau discontinued the clogs and pivoted fully to kitchenware. The shop *Lau Choy Seng* is still going strong today, run by the second and third generations of his family.

FINAL WORD

Will wooden clogs ever come back into fashion? Today's preferred footwear is the injection moulded foamy clog and slide. But could a creative rebrand using sustainable wood and a little orthotic styling for comfort, make traditional wooden clogs a more planet friendly alternative? Perhaps an eco-minded influencer may rediscover wooden clogs and cause a viral sensation on social media. If this happens, we will once again hear that click-clack sound on the streets of Singapore! P

The Lau Choy Seng Kitchenware shop at 25 Temple Street. Photo taken by the author.

GILL CRUIKSHANK is a docent for URA-FOM Chinatown Heritage Trails and can be mostly found sauntering with noiseless footsteps around the precinct of Tanjong Pagar.

HOKUSAI: THE FLOWING INFLUENCE OF A JAPANESE MASTER

CANDICE YEO DELVES INTO HOKUSAI'S TIMELESS IMAGES OF WATER

When one thinks of Japanese woodblock prints (also known as *ukiyo-e*, a genre of woodblock prints that flourished during the 16th to 18th centuries in Japan), a notable image often springs to mind. *The Great Wave* by Hokusai has been endlessly reproduced, reinterpreted, and reimagined, cementing its place as a global icon, appearing everywhere from cups and tablecloths to album covers, and most recently, on Japan's newly minted 1000 yen notes. Indeed, no discussion of Hokusai's art would be complete without *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, perhaps the most famous woodblock print in the world. It is also the pinnacle of the artist's fascination with 'water' as a dominant element in many of his works.

In 2024, newly launched 1000 Japanese yen notes used an image from Hokusai's The Great Wave off Kanagawa. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

Born in 1760 in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), Hokusai dedicated his life to the relentless pursuit of artistic reinvention. Legend has it that he would rise before dawn, working tirelessly until exhaustion. He famously declared just before he passed away at age 90, "If heaven had granted me five more years, I could have become a true painter." Over a career that spanned seven decades, he became one of Japan's most prolific artists, producing thousands of woodblock prints, paintings, and illustrations. More than just a brilliant artist, he was also fuelled by insatiable curiosity and constantly sought to reinvent himself. He was fascinated by many things and often obsessed over them, from the study of nature to natural sciences and the supernatural.

A replica of how the artist worked most of his life - in a messy room with his daughter watching over him, Hokusai Museum, Tokyo. Photo courtesy of the author.

WATER AS MUSE

Among the many themes Hokusai explored, water stood out as far more than a visual subject – it was a metaphor for life's fluidity, strength, and impermanence. His fascination with the element was likely shaped by Japan's geography and culture. Surrounded by oceans and crisscrossed by rivers, Japan has a long-standing cultural reverence for water, evident in its Shinto rituals, Zen gardens, and maritime history. Hokusai drew upon this rich tradition, creating works that celebrated water's diverse forms and moods.

In the *ukiyo-e* tradition, water often served as a backdrop for narratives or as a framing device. Hokusai elevated it to a starring role, depicting it with an unprecedented dynamism and realism. Whether crashing against cliffs, cascading over rocks, or reflecting the light of the moon, Hokusai's water exudes a life of its own.

Hokusai's powerful The Great Wave off Kanagawa. *Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

THE GREAT WAVE OFF KANAGAWA: A TIMELESS ICON

The Great Wave off Kanagawa, part of his series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (1831 – 1833), depicts an enormous wave curling toward three fishing boats, its foam forming claw-like shapes that seem almost alive. In the background, Mount Fuji rises serenely, dwarfed by the overwhelming force of the water. The wave is both majestic and menacing, a reminder of nature's power and humanity's fragility. The juxtaposition of the wave's dramatic movement with the stillness of Mount Fuji creates a striking tension, embodying the duality of chaos and tranquility.

Beyond its visual brilliance, *The Great Wave* resonates on a symbolic level. The wave's ephemeral nature speaks to the transience of life, a theme deeply rooted in Japanese aesthetics. Meanwhile, its energy and scale reflect Hokusai's lifelong quest to capture the sublime power of nature.

BEYOND THE WAVE: *THE WATERFALLS* SERIES AND OTHER WORKS

While *The Great Wave* remains Hokusai's most celebrated work, his *Waterfalls* series, completed in the 1830s, offers a different yet equally compelling perspective on the element. Comprising eight woodblock prints, the series depicts waterfalls across Japan, each rendered with meticulous detail and poetic sensitivity.

The Kirifuri Waterfall at Kurokami Mountain in Shimotsuke Province. *Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

In *The Kirifuri Waterfall at Kurokami Mountain in Shimotsuke Province*, Hokusai captures a cascade of water plunging from a high cliff, its streams dividing and converging like threads of silk. The surrounding landscape is lush and vibrant, with human figures dwarfed by the grandeur of nature. The print exemplifies Hokusai's ability to convey movement and texture, as the water seems to shimmer and flow off the page.

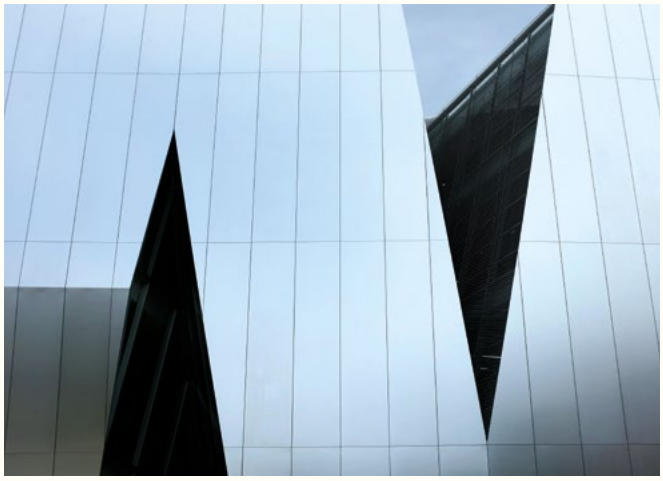
Another standout from the series, *The Amida Waterfall on the Kiso Highway*, showcases Hokusai's mastery of composition. The waterfall is framed by rugged cliffs, its water descending in elegant ribbons. Hokusai pays equal attention to the surrounding flora and the travellers gazing at the cascade, emphasizing the harmony between humans and nature.

The Amida Waterfall on the Kiso Highway. *Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

Water also plays a central role in other notable works, such as *One Thousand Images of the Sea*, also known as the *Oceans of Wisdom* series. Here, Hokusai focuses on the people who lived around the sea and the rivers, and how they went fishing. He continues with the undulating wave forms which echo the rhythms of water, once again demonstrating a deep understanding of its patterns.

AN ENDURING LEGACY

Hokusai's work transcended far beyond the borders of Edo-period Japan, fuelling a fascination with all things Japanese that swept across Europe in the 19th century. He influenced major artists like Van Gogh, as can be seen in Van Gogh's highly celebrated *The Starry Night*, and Claude Monet, in his famous *Water Lilies* series. As the enduring waves of influence from Hokusai's work continue to ripple outward, it is clear that his artistic depiction of the water he so loved will remain a source of inspiration for centuries to come.



The Sumida-Hokusai Museum in Tokyo, that houses many of the artist's groundbreaking creations. Photo courtesy of Nikita Suyetin on Unsplash.

CANDICE YEO is an active National Museum of Singapore docent and member of the FOM Study Tour and Curio Committees.

EXPLORING THE SPLENDOR OF COLOURFUL QING PORCELAIN IN 19TH CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS

JOIN **EMILIE SAMAAN** ON THE DISCOVERY OF CHINESE POLYCHROME PORCELAINS IN WESTERN ART

Talking about Chinese ceramics and one will immediately think of the exquisite blue-and-white porcelain that captivated Europeans in the 16th century due to its high quality and elegant designs. However, there is a less well-known story regarding porcelain: European's fascination with the vibrant colours of polychrome porcelains.

From the 18th century, European interest in blue-and-white designs began to wane as the quality of these pieces exported to Europe declined and collectors started to shift their attention toward polychrome porcelain produced during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), known for its vivid colours and complex designs. Polychrome porcelain has since coexisted with blue-and-white pieces in European collections as well as in the interiors of wealthy French and British homes. But many questions may come to our minds. In the 19th century Europeans were obsessed with showcasing foreign artefacts in their homes so how were the porcelains displayed together with other Asian items? Did the porcelains serve practical purposes? Undoubtedly, polychrome porcelain captivated collectors, manufacturers and historians alike. Therefore, we may ask ourselves how did the introduction of polychrome porcelain impact Europeans' knowledge of Chinese ceramics?

THE BEAUTY OF COLOURS: POLYCHROME PORCELAINS IN EUROPEAN COLLECTIONS

During the Qing dynasty, craftsmen from Jingdezhen created new types of porcelain with a large variety of decoration and glazes. The production of *famille verte* (green family) and *famille rose* (pink family) porcelains began in China during the Kangxi period (r.1661-1722) and the first pieces were exported to Europe in the 18th century. The names *famille verte* or *famille rose* refer to a colour palette or a combination of overglaze enamel colours (red, yellow, green or pink) rather than a specific decorative motif or pattern. Chinese potters never used such terminology to describe their production but Albert Jacquemart (1808-1875), a French ceramics collector, introduced the term *famille verte* or *famille rose,* in his book *Histoire de la porcelaine* (1862), to characterise polychrome porcelains.

European collectors admire porcelain's whiteness and translucence, but they also look for unique pieces that mix harmonious colours and elegant decoration. For example, the dish *famille verte* lobed fish, from the Asian Civilisations Museum collection in Singapore, is a fine example of Qing-dynasty porcelain exported to the West. The vibrant enamels and the detailed ornamentation on the dish reflect the qualities of Kangxi-period *famille verte* wares.

Famille verte *lobed dish, porcelain, d. : 28.2 cm, China, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722), Asian Civilisations Museum.*

The 19th century is known for the establishment of prestigious porcelain collections across Europe. Moreover, the imperial porcelains looted from Yuanmingyuan palace in China were exhibited in the Tuileries Palace in France in 1861, and it may have sparked collectors' interest in porcelain. For instance, the porcelain collection of French explorer Ernest Grandidier (1833-1912) now preserved at the Musée Guimet in Paris, shows a significant number of polychrome wares such as this *famille verte* large Chinese bowl, which depicts a bird resting on a peach tree branch. A floral border adorns the inside rim of the bowl, adding a delicate touch to the decoration.

The enamels used for the decoration on *famille verte* and *famille rose* are known to be soft and elegant which give a feeling of great delicacy and precise execution. The ceramics collection of Salomon James de Rothschild (1835-1864), the famous banker, reflects his preference for enamelled porcelain made between the 18th and 19th centuries. In her research, the French art historian Pauline d'Abrigeon who specialises in Chinese porcelain, explains that Rothschild's collection was primarily made of porcelains from the *famille rose*, as evidenced by the dish with beautiful pink floral motifs. During the reign of Chinese emperor Yongzheng (r.1722–1735), opaque pink glazes were made in imperial kilns for export. They were transported from Canton to Europe, where they were highly appreciated.

It is not only the French collectors who were interested in polychrome porcelains but also Sir David Percival (1892-1964), a prominent British financier and scholar of Chinese ceramics, who had a large ceramics collection that is now on permanent display at the British Museum in London. His collection includes very exquisite pieces like this *famille rose plate* which displays five elegant ladies in a luxurious garden with flower sprays and peaches near a pond. In addition to the detailed central subject, the plate's rim is decorated with lovely lotus blossoms, demonstrating the potter's technical expertise.

Famille verte *bowl with bird on a peach tree, porcelain, d. : 20.5 cm, China, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Paris, Musée Guimet. RMN-Grand Palais (MNAAG, Paris) / Michel Urtado.*

In addition to *famille verte* and *famille rose*, Chinese imari porcelain received a great success among European collectors. Chinese imari porcelain is characterised by iron red enamels applied to underglaze blue and white porcelain. Those colourful porcelains are commonly mistaken for Japanese wares because of their similar decorative patterns. Flowers and landscape are prominent ornamental motifs in Chinese Imari porcelain, as seen in *Potpourri*, a painting by British artist George Dunlop Leslie (1835-1921) completed in 1874. The artist's artwork displays two young ladies making potpourri surrounded by Japanese Imari vases and Chinese Imari plates. The artwork depicts how Japanese and Chinese porcelains were harmoniously displayed in British households.

Famille rose *dish, porcelain, d. 20.8 cm, China, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Yongzheng (1723-1736), Hôtel Salomon de Rothschild, Paris, France. Fondation des artistes.*

Famille rose *plate, porcelain, d. 15.5 cm, China, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Yongzheng (1722-1735), British Museum. The Trustees of the British Museum.*

George Dunlop Leslie, Potpourri, *1874, oil on canvas, 99 x 99 cm. Private collection. Sotheby's.*

EXQUISITE PORCELAINS FOR LUXURIOUS INTERIORS

In addition to collectors, painters were also interested in Chinese porcelain, as evidenced by 17th century Dutch paintings of luxury porcelains in sophisticated still lives. Throughout the 19th century, artists frequently used Chinese porcelain to illustrate the esthetic trends of the time. It also reveals how the wealthy's need for authentic items led to a fascination with foreign objects. The artwork *Contemplation* by Belgian artist Albert Roosenboom depicts a beautiful living room from the 19th century with two magnificent Chinese *famille rose* porcelains, a vase and a dish, sitting on a rococo table. The two porcelains settle perfectly into the interior furnishing and a black Chinese lacquer cabinet complete the artwork by demonstrating the European taste for exotic objects.

Albert Roosenboom, Contemplation, *late 19th century, oil on canvas, 66 cm x 50.8 cm. Private collection.*

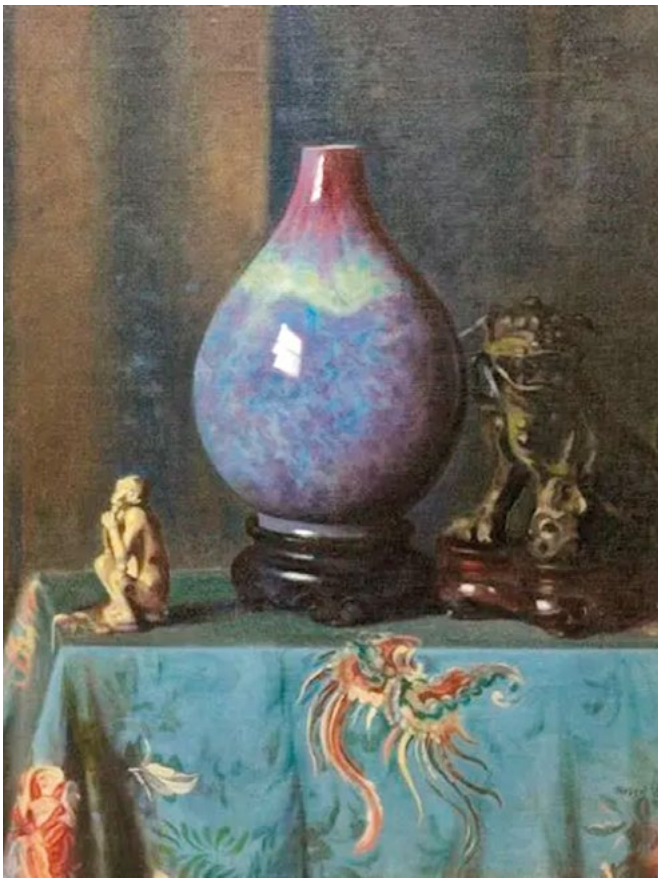
Auguste Toulmouche, Fireside Reflections, *19th century, oil on canvas, 64.8 cm x 46.4 cm. Private collection. Haynes Fine Art.*

It is often assumed that Chinese porcelain has always been associated with wealth, taste and elegance and rich Europeans displayed it in their homes in cabinets, on mantelpieces, or even specially created 'porcelain rooms'. Polychrome porcelain was also frequently depicted in 19th century interior paintings alongside with other Asian items, whether Chinese or Japanese, such as folding screen or fans, as seen in *Fireside Reflections* by French artist Auguste Toulmouche (1829-1890).

TEA TIME WITH COLOURFUL PORCELAINS

However, Chinese porcelain was not only intended to be displayed in wealthy homes to show the good taste of the owner. Canton porcelains, for instance, were used in everyday life and were characterised by brilliant colours and elaborate decorations. These porcelains were created in Jingdezhen factories and then shipped to Canton, where they were decorated by local artists. The decoration included palace sceneries, bird motifs and even flowers or plants arranged in large polylobed medallions, and they mostly consisted of baluster-shaped vases or dinnerware. For example, porcelain tea sets made in Canton were used for European dining and were reasonably priced. The

Frédéric Soulacroix, Afternoon Tea, *end of 19th century, oil on canvas, 81 x 62 cm. Private Collection Lilian Picanstor. Wikipedia.*



Hubert Vos, Empress Cixi's imperial vase, *1934, oil on canvas, 72.2 x 61 cm, Marché de l'art.*

French painter Frédéric Soulacroix (1858-1933) frequently employed Canton porcelain in his genre paintings, as shown in his work *Afternoon Tea*. In the artwork, he portrayed three young ladies having tea with a Canton tea set, promoting the practical usage of Qing dynasty Chinese porcelain in social gatherings.

A NEW LOOK ON CHINESE PORCELAIN

Although Chinese potters kept the production of porcelain techniques a secret for centuries, Europeans had always attempted to replicate Chinese ceramics. Around 1710, the first hard porcelains were produced at Meissen in Germany, following decades of research. The discovery of porcelain production techniques encouraged the setting up of numerous factories in Europe such as Worcester or Chelsea in England or Sèvres in France.

In the early 19th century, the Sèvres factory in France requested porcelain samples or information from merchants, navigators or consuls in China in order to boost the production of French porcelain. The Chinese priest Joseph Ly (1803-1854) whose Chinese name was Li Yue Se travelled to China and sent out samples of colours to Europe. Following that, Sevres potters examined the items carefully to reproduce these unique enamels. All the new research on porcelains encouraged Europeans to look at Chinese porcelain with a fresh perspective, that is, porcelain was no longer an object of curiosity, but rather a subject of study. This renewed interest in Chinese porcelains facilitated the development of Chinese studies. For example, the book of French scholar Octave du Sartel (1828-1894), *Porcelaine de Chine*, published in 1881, introduced a scientific approach to Chinese objects.

However, the fascination with colourful enamels on porcelain has not only affected scholars but also artists who have contributed to the understanding of Chinese porcelain. One great example is Hubert Vos (1855-1935), a Dutch painter who provided an intimate glimpse into Chinese porcelains. During his trip to China in the early 20th century, he painted two portraits of dowager empress Cixi (1835-1908). In return, she offered him imperial porcelain from her private collection which Vos beautifully captured in elegant still lives.

Western countries have always been fascinated by Chinese porcelain, whether it is polychrome or blue-and-white, and have collected and tried to replicate it in great numbers. The inclusion of these exquisite porcelains in paintings offers us a fresh look at them. And we are fortunate to be able to admire these exquisite artworks in museums across Asia and Europe today. P

FOR FURTHER READING

Kerr Rose, Thomas Ian, *Chinese ceramics: porcelain of the Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1998*

EMILIE SAMAAN is a FOM Member and a PhD student in art history in the University of Lille in France.

SINGAPORE POST: STAMPING A MESSAGE

INSPIRED BY HIS PHILATELIC HOBBY, **ROBERT CASTEELS** LOOKS AT THE FABRICATION PROCESS OF SINGAPORE POST'S STAMPS, AND EXPLORES THE MESSAGE CONVEYED BY THOSE COMMEMORATING SOME OF SINGAPORE'S MUSEUMS

Photos taken by the author.

A stamp is a miniature artwork that carries a message of national identity. Its creation comprises numerous complex steps. A few important ones are described below.

THE MAKING OF A SINGAPORE POST STAMP

First, wood is diced into small chips. The chips are cooked to form a pulp. The pulp is cleaned, saturated with water and further processed to fabricate wove paper. The texture of this paper must be even to get a good surface on which to print.

Who designs the miniature artwork that is a stamp? SingPost is the government agency turned corporation which issues stamps. Given the significance of stamps in depicting important aspects of our nation and the limited places in a year's stamp programme, proposed stamp themes must satisfy strict criteria. In the past, stamps were designed by advertising agencies, then by the winner of a public competition. However, the outcomes were not always desirable. Today the Stamp Advisory Committee is responsible for evaluating and recommending the appropriate themes and designs to the Infocom Media Authority. Since the 1980s, stamps have become miniature artwork created by Singaporean artists and graphic designers.

The stamp designer must include the name of our country, the value of the stamp and the currency. Any other information is optional. Since 1967 the name of our country is only stated in English. In 1995, the No Value Indicator (NVI) denomination made its debut on a stamp.

Once the design is completed, it must be printed on the wove paper fabricated for the stamp using lithography. Lithography is a printing process based on the fact that water and grease do not mix. The stamp design is put on a metal plate by a photographic process. When the plate is inked, the greasy ink sticks only to the image area. If paper were pressed against the plate at this point, the design would print backwards. So, the design is first offset onto a rubber blanket, and then onto paper. Lithographed stamps have a flat and smooth appearance.

After a sheet of stamps has been printed, it is ready for the application of adhesive. This is not glue: it is a plant-based gelatinous gum. Self-adhesive stamps are gummed stamps with a protective backing which do not require moistening.

The Singapore postage stamp is now ready to be used!

STAMPING A MESSAGE

Postage stamps are much more than a receipt for services rendered by the post office. Since their invention in 1840, stamps have remained fabulous storytellers. They convey a message of national pride and give international publicity. With the self-explanatory exception of postage due stamps, SingPost has not issued numeral stamps. In other words, every stamp is stamped with a message. SingPost regularly issues commemorative stamps to mark significant national achievements or international events that are relevant to Singapore.

COMMEMORATING SINGAPORE'S MUSEUMS

SingPost issued four stamps for the inauguration of the Asian Civilisations Museum (located at that time in the building that now houses the Peranakan Museum at Armenian Street) in 1996 and another four for its re-opening in 2003 at the Empress Place Building. Each set sends a different message. The 1996 set focuses on culture rather than on the building, which appears in small size in the bottom right corner. The emphasis is on the Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Persian and Turkish cultures, reinforced by the information indicated in minuscule letters at the bottom.

5-6-1996: Asian Civilisations Museum, *designer Melvin Ng Puay Chiew, lithography by Joh Enschede, size 40.5 mm x 30.45 mm.*

The 2003 set charts the milestones of the tumultuous history of the Empress Place Building, from government offices (NVI and 60¢ stamps) to the Empress Place Museum ($1 stamp) to the Asian Civilisations Museum ($2 stamp). The $1 stamp shows the Neo-Palladian style designed by colonial engineer J.F.A. McNair, along with two artefacts. The $2 stamp shows the building's cycloidal vaults above doors, internal space, glass canopy and doric columns.

26-02-2003: Opening of the Asian Civilisations Museum, *designer Sylvia S.H. Tan, offset lithography by House of Questa Limited, size 44.45 mm x 27.94 mm.*

The Peranakan Museum has also been commemorated by SingPost. The magnificent 2008 set of eight stamps (shown below) is structured as *se-tenant* horizontally by two. *Se-tenant* is a French term used in English to designate stamps of different design that are joined together. This set shows exquisite details of Peranakan plates (#1 and #2), embroidery (#3 and #4), vases (#5 and #6) and ceramics (#7 and #8).

Top row L-R #s 1-4;
bottom row L-R #s 5-8
08-04-2008: Peranakan Museum Collection, *designer Nicodemus Loh Fook Chee, offset lithography by Cartor Security printing, size 40 mm x 32 mm, perforation 13 x 13 1/4.*

A recent September 2024 issue (shown below) is entitled *Peranakan Museum Treasures.* This set also groups the stamps *se-tenant* by two, but this time vertically. The artefact is shown on the upper stamp: bowl, covered jar, tiffin carrier, cloth, star brooch and handkerchief. A detail of the same artefact appears in the corresponding lower stamp.

20-09-2024: Peranakan Museum, *designer Hazel Lee, offset lithography by Brebner Print, size 35 mm x 37.8 mm for the upper stamp and 35 mm x 22.4 mm for the lower stamp.*

The 2008 commemorative set had an additional extraordinary sheet (shown below) that was created solely for the joy of philatelists. To depict a beaded wedding purse, tiny caviar beads were manually affixed onto a pouch-shaped stamp.

The next time you receive stamped mail, or affix a stamp to an envelope, remember that within its miniature frame, each humble stamp is a time capsule that mirrors the political, social and economic evolution of a country. Each stamp is an ambassador that tells a unique story and contributes to build our collective memory. Each stamp stamps out a message. P

08-04-2008 Minisheet, designer Nicodemus Loh Fook Chee, offset lithography by Cartor Security printing, size 100 mm x 110 mm; issued by SingPost in a presentation pack with the title: World's First Beaded Stamp.

DR ROBERT CASTEELS is an FOM member, music composer and philatelist.

INNOVATIONS IN PAPERMAKING: EXPLORING STPI'S CREATIVE LEGACY

KAREN WONG EXPLAINS THE ORIGINS OF PAPERMAKING AND THE USE OF PAPER IN ITS INNOVATIVE COLLABORATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AT STPI – CREATIVE WORKSHOP & GALLERY

All images are courtsey of STPI, unless stated otherwise.

Paper, often considered a humble medium, holds profound significance in the world of art, particularly within the context of printmaking. STPI stands as a testament to the transformative role of paper in contemporary art practices. This article explores how paper intersects with the mission of STPI, illustrating its relevance in fostering artistic innovation and bridging cultural and artistic communities.

THE ORIGINS OF PAPER

The invention of paper is attributed to Cai Lun, a Chinese eunuch and official, around 105 CE during the Han Dynasty. Cai Lun's innovation involved creating a sheet-like material from a mixture of mulberry bark, hemp, rags, and water. This early form of paper was revolutionary, providing a more accessible and versatile medium for writing compared to the bamboo slips and silk used previously.

THE SPREAD OF PAPERMAKING

Papermaking technology gradually spread from China to other parts of Asia and eventually to the Islamic world. By the 8th century, paper production techniques had reached the Middle East, where they were further refined. By the 12th century, paper had made its way into Europe, where it significantly impacted the production of books and documents, further fuelling the spread of literacy and learning.

THE PROCESS OF PAPER PRODUCTION

Traditionally, paper is produced through a process that involves several key steps:

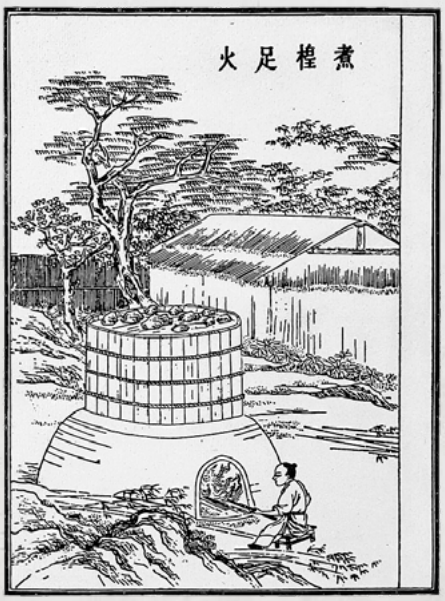
Pulping: Raw materials, such as wood chips or recycled paper, are broken down into fibres using mechanical and chemical processes.

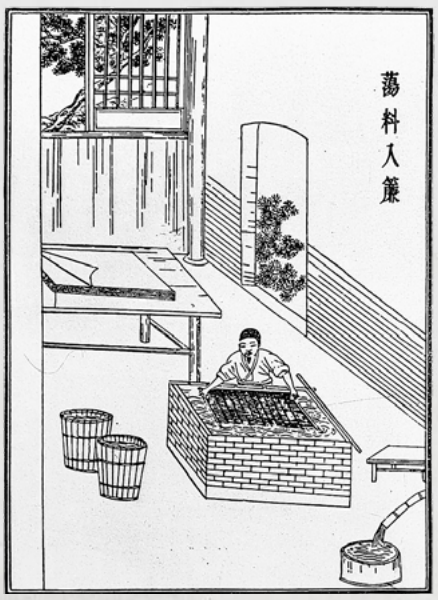
Formation: The pulp is diluted with water and spread onto a mesh screen to form a thin, even layer.

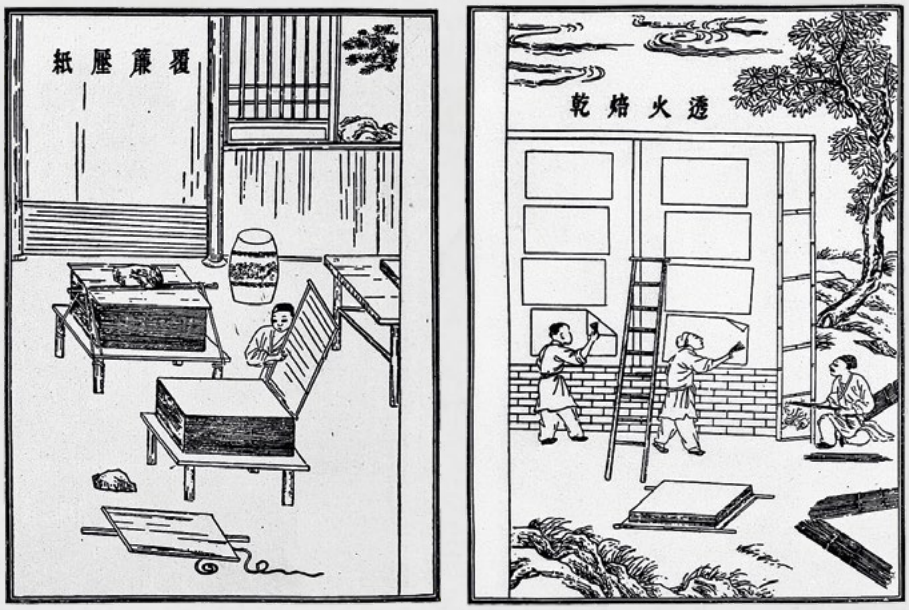
Pressing: Excess water is removed by pressing the paper between rollers or felt.

Drying: The paper is then dried, either by air or through heated rollers.

Finishing: The dried paper is calendared (smoothed and pressed).







Images of Ming dynasty woodcut describing five major steps in the ancient Chinese papermaking process as outlined by Cai Lun in 105 CE. Photos courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

THE ROLE OF PAPER IN PRINTMAKING

Printmaking, as a traditional art form, relies heavily on paper as a critical medium. The texture, weight, and absorbency of paper can dramatically influence the outcome of a print, making it an integral part of the creative process. Artists select specific types of paper to complement their techniques, whether they are working with etching, lithography, or screen printing. The choice of paper affects not only the aesthetic quality of the artwork but also its durability and presentation.

ABOUT STPI

STPI is a dynamic creative workshop and contemporary art gallery based in Singapore. Established in 2002, STPI is a non-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. STPI sits alongside National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum as part of the national Visual Arts Cluster of leading institutions in the region.

PAPER AS A MEDIUM AT STPI

At STPI, paper plays a pivotal role in the creative processes of both established and emerging artists. STPI not only houses a state-of-the-art papermill - one of the largest in Asia – it also has cutting-edge printmaking capabilities. These facilities allow artists under the Visiting Artist Program (VAP) to experiment with different print techniques, textures, weights, and finishes of paper, enabling them to push the boundaries of their art.

STPI's expertise in paper and printmaking supports artists in creating unique works that often challenge conventional norms. The institution's commitment to excellence is reflected in its provision of specialised paper and tools, which cater to a diverse range of artistic styles and techniques.

NOTABLE COLLABORATIONS AND INNOVATIONS

STPI is known for its collaborations with prominent local and international artists and printmakers. These partnerships often result in groundbreaking works that utilise paper in innovative ways. For example, artists might employ traditional techniques alongside modern materials, creating hybrid works that offer new perspectives on printmaking.

One notable aspect of STPI's approach is its emphasis on the role of paper in creating multi-dimensional artworks. Artists have the opportunity to explore how paper can be manipulated not just as a surface but as a sculptural element. This exploration often leads to unique pieces that challenge the conventional boundaries between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art.

STPI. Image courtesy of TimeOut.

Eko Nugroho. Photo by Toni Cuhadi.

We are what we mask by *Eko Negruho. Installation view.*

EKO NUGROHO

Eko Nugroho (b. 1977) is an internationally renowned contemporary artist based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He is known for his contemporary artwork that often blends elements of traditional culture with modern techniques. His bodies of work consist of paintings, drawings, embroideries, murals, sculpture and video.

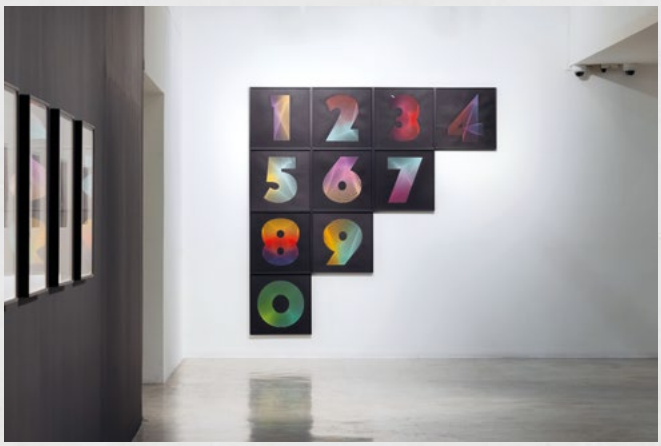
At STPI Nugroho explored various techniques, creating works that reflect his distinctive style while engaging with the medium of paper. This collaboration allowed him to experiment with textures and layers, resulting in vibrant pieces that resonate with his artistic vision and cultural themes. Nugroho's practice of sewing paper involves using stitching as a technique to create texture and depth in his artwork. By sewing through paper, he adds physical and visual complexity, allowing the paper to become more than a flat surface. This method can result in intricate patterns and textures, and it often ties into themes of layering and intersection found in his broader body of work in collaboration with STPI. This technique complements his exploration of contemporary issues and cultural narratives, adding a tactile dimension that invites viewers to engage with the materiality of the artwork.

PAE WHITE

Pae White (b. 1963) is an American artist known for her diverse practice that encompasses textiles, sculpture, installation, and design. Her work often explores the intersections of culture, nature, and technology, utilising materials in unconventional ways to challenge perceptions of art and craft.

White, an artist known for her innovative use of materials and techniques, also collaborated with STPI, exploring the technique of flocking. This involves applying a fine, velvety material to surfaces to create texture and visual depth. In this project, she utilised colour fibres to create intricate, tactile surfaces on her works. This collaboration resulted in a series of vibrant textured pieces that merge printmaking with the tactile quality of flocking. The partnership with STPI allowed White to experiment with new textures and dimensions, resulting in dynamic pieces that challenge the boundaries of traditional printmaking. The collaboration not only showcased her artistic vision but also highlighted STPI's commitment to fostering experimental practices in the art community.

Pae White. Photo by Toni Cuhadi.



Friendship is magic *by Pae White. Installation View.*

Do Ho Suh. Photo by Toni Cuhadi.

New Works *by Do Ho Suh. Installation view.*

DO HO SUH

Do Ho Suh, (b. 1962) is a Korean artist known for his architectural design installations and sculptures. He brought his collection of sketches and drawings to STPI with the intention of converting them into prints. This posed challenges, however, as he couldn't stay for long. While he was away the creative workshop team, having researched his work, suggested exploring thread drawings. While thread and fabric has been integral to his installations, Suh had never considered thread as a drawing material and paper as a fabric to be used for sewing. Suh's thread drawings were a groundbreaking innovation for the artist and STPI's Creative Workshop team, first achieved during his 2010 residency. The threads are embedded in STPI handmade paper, forming an intricate matrix of thread strands that are reminiscent of his larger three-dimensional works. Over the years, Suh's thread drawings have become ever-more complicated in form and scale, attesting to the fruitful outcomes of STPI's artist collaborations.

Look out for Suzann Victor's upcoming exhibition, *Constellations* from 15th January to 2nd March 2025 at STPI. FOM guided tours are on Thursdays at 11.30 am, Saturdays and Sundays at 2pm. More details can be found on the STPI website.

SUZANN VICTOR

Previous to her collaboration with STPI, Singaporean born artist Suzann Victor (b.1959) had used paper as a medium to work on, but not with. Victor started her career as a painter, then went on to explore performance art and installations. Some of her artworks are prominently displayed in Singapore. One of them is the swinging chandelier installation in the National Museum of Singapore.

At STPI, she created *Symphony in Blue Droplets* for her solo exhibition in 2015. This piece showcases her innovative use of paper as a painting medium, where she poured paper pulp onto acrylic disks. After the water evaporated, she assembled the installation and mounted it to the wall, illustrating the unique potential of paper in art. She has made extensive use of paper pulp in her installations at STPI. Her works show the diversity and expanse of her abilities as an artist and an unquestionable openness towards paper.

STPI exemplifies the transformative impact of paper in the realm of contemporary art. Through its dedication to printmaking and innovative use of paper, STPI has established itself as a leading institution that bridges artistic traditions with modern practices. As artists continue to explore and redefine the boundaries of paper, STPI remains at the forefront, nurturing creativity and contributing to the evolving dialogue in the world of print and paper art. P

FOR FURTHER READING

The Printmaking Bible: The Complete Guide to Printmaking Techniques by Ann d'Arcy Hughes and Hebe Vernon-Morris.

Suzann Victor. Photo by Toni Cuhadi.

Imprint *by Suzann Victor. Installation view.*

KAREN WONG is a museum guide and art educator with a particular interest in paper and printmaking.

GORINTO: A UNIQUELY JAPANESE PAGODA

KAMSIN KANEKO DECODES THE SYMBOLISM OF *GORINTO* LAYER BY LAYER

A board game called *Gorinto* was released a couple of years ago. It offers players the chance to achieve balance, harmony, and understanding by manipulating the elements. The makers of the game ask, "Can you gain the understanding you need to uncover true elemental wisdom?" And while it may be a big ask of a board game, stone monuments, also called *gorinto*, found in Japan from which the game draws its inspiration, have embodied this question since the 12th century.

Gorinto *located at the Okunoin cemetery in Koyasan, Wakayama prefecture, Japan. It dates from 1627. Koyasan is an important centre of Shingon Buddhism. Photo credit: Brytta on iStock.*

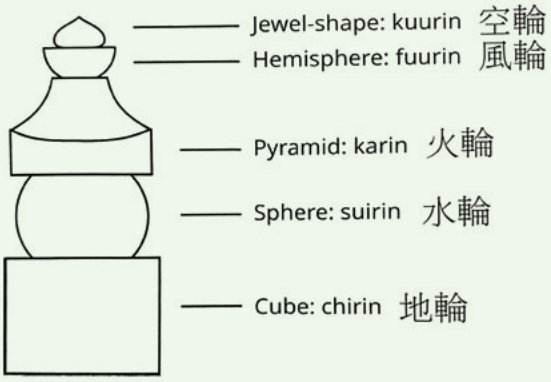
WHAT IS A *GORINTO?*

Five-layer stupa, five-element pagoda, five-ring tower or even dharma realm five-wheel pagoda are all terms used in English to explain the Japanese term *gorinto*. Literally, the word breaks down into *go* (five), *rin* (wheel or ring), and *to* (pagoda or tower).

Here I'll use the term five-element pagoda. The word element is on double-duty, referring to both the five parts it is made up of and the five elements of the universe. Like the five-element pagoda itself, each of the parts has more than one layer of meaning.

Five-element pagodas are associated with esoteric sects of Japanese Buddhism, particularly the Shingon school of Buddhism. Made up of five layers, each with a different shape, stacked on top of each other, they offer a tangible representation of the interconnectedness of all things.

At the base is a cube representing the earth, next is a sphere for water, a pyramid for fire, and fourth is a hemisphere for the wind, and finally the sky is in the shape of a *hoju* (a wish-granting jewel), or a ball.



The five shapes and names in Japanese of the five elements. Image from Wikipedia.

Five-element pagodas are typically made of stone. There are examples of those made from rock crystal or bronze too. They usually stand between one and three metres tall, although there are some much taller. They are used as reliquaries, meditation aids, and most commonly as grave markers, signifying that people return to the elements when they die. *Gorinto* have been in use for roughly 900 years, originating in around the 12th century.

CROSS-CULTURAL ORIGINS OF *GORINTO*

Five-element pagodas are unique to Japan, but they were influenced by Buddhist monuments that originated in China and before that in ancient India. In the early centuries of the Buddhist faith, first in India and then beyond, relics of the historic Lord Buddha were interred in a type of burial mound known as a stupa.

Gorinto *with the Sanskrit names for the five elements written in Siddham script. Photo credit: Holgs on iStock.*

Stupa were places of worship and devotion for early Buddhist followers and were believed to have mystic power to aid the devotee on his path to enlightenment. Over time, as Buddhism took hold in China, these monuments transformed into the pagoda. Their function also changed and adapted, for example, as libraries for religious texts.

The incorporation of the five elements within the form of the pagoda seems to be a Japanese innovation. But the five elements have their origin directly in the ancient Indian beliefs that gave rise to the Buddhist faith.

The Sanskrit terms for the five elements are often found written on each layer of the five-element pagoda, offering a visible sign of this cross-cultural influence. *Gorinto* where Japanese characters are used can also be found.

SIMPLE FORM, COMPLEX IDEAS

The shapes that make up the five-element pagoda are deceptively simple, but they represent complex ideas that have been given physical form through geometry. There are more layers of meaning than there is space to talk about here. While I'll focus on the five elements, they also represent other groupings of five found in Buddhist thought, such as the five Buddhas.

Gorinto *with the five elements written in Japanese kanji (Chinese characters), Koyasan, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. Koyasan is considered by many the 'home' of* gorinto. *Image by Erin LaMattery.*

From bottom to top, the elements are as follows: *a* (*chi* 地) earth; *va* (*sui* 水) water; *ra* (*ka* 火) fire; *ha* (*fu* 風) wind); and finally, *kha* (*ku*/ *mu* 空) the Japanese could simply refer to the sky, but it also has the sense of void, emptiness, nothingness. (Sanskrit first, Japanese second.) By bringing them together these five elements represent the entire cosmos.

GORINTO: AID TO MEDITATION AND BECOMING ONE WITH THE COSMOS

While most often used as grave markers, some sects of Japanese Buddhism also used the *gorinto* as an aid to meditation. The elements are correlated to the human body and the five *chakras*, or energy centres, in the body.

The earth is located in the lower part of the body, including the legs; water is in the stomach region; fire is in the chest; air in the region of the face; and the element of void, or ether, is in the crown of the head.

Fig. 284 (above) :
A Japanese drawing showing the correlation of the parts of the Stupa of the Five Elements and the cakras in the body. The upper pair of hands make the mudrā of Mahāvairocana in the Diamond World; the lower pair make his mudrā in the Matrix World. The two small circles drawn in the jewel of the fifth Element, Space (ākāśa),correspond to nirvāṇa points and represent the attainment of Enlightenment

An image of the gorinto *representing the human body and the Dainichi Buddha. Image from* The Symbolism of the Stupa *by Adrian Snodgrass.*

The Buddhist practitioner would meditate on each element in turn, starting at the base and moving up, focusing on the shapes, the Sanskrit words, and the distinct colour, which also represents the elements: yellow, white, red, black, and sky blue, in that order. By doing so, the aim was to identify with the *gorinto*, and so the cosmos and the body of the Dainichi Buddha.

The Dainichi Buddha, also known as Mahavairocana, is an important figure whose radiance extends throughout the cosmos. It is his body that is represented by the form of the five-element pagoda.

CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF *GORINTO*

Today, *gorinto* are most often found in ancient graveyards, moss-covered and full of the atmosphere and energy of mediaeval Japan. But expressions of this idea have found contemporary forms too.

Contemporary Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto has created modern *gorinto* in which he incorporates a seascape in the central element of water. The artist says that while he has no Buddhist faith himself, he sees the form as a meditation on the origin of human consciousness. Images of his beautiful *gorinto* can be found on his website.

Finally, wooden grave markers called *sotoba* echo the shapes of *gorinto* and are still in use during Buddhist funeral rites today. P

FOR FURTHER READING

https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/five-elements
The Symbolism of the Stupa by Adrian Snodgrass

KAMSIN KANEKO is a docent at the ACM. She lived in Japan for over fifteen years, where she loved exploring Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines and the rich history and symbolism of the culture.

THE IMPACT OF THE MEKONG RIVER

JOYCE JENKINS EXTOLS THE MARVELS OF THE MEKONG RIVER

Photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

The confluence of the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers at Phnom Penh – a vast body of water stretching to the horizon.

At a recent leadership workshop in Phnom Penh, I was impressed by the young women participants from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos who are knowledgeable and passionate about the Mekong River's importance to the region and the climate and environmental issues threatening it. They aim to collaborate across borders to influence their communities in addressing them. Why does this matter? What is so important about the Mekong River for the people of Southeast Asia and the world?

A short stroll from the workshop venue, in the square in front of Phnom Penh's Royal Palace, you get a sense of the impact the Mekong River has on the culture, landscape, history, religion and society of Southeast Asia. The view is awe-inspiring: a vast body of water stretching to the horizon where the Tonle Sap River joins the Mekong.

Saffron robed Buddhist monks gather to admire the view and take selfies. Tourists and local families enjoy the river breezes and feed the pigeons flocking near the food vendors while watching the boats setting off for dinner cruises.

This peaceful scene belies Cambodia's tumultuous history, which is inextricably linked with that of the Mekong region. Known as 'The Mother of Water,' for millennia the Mekong River has been a vital source of food and a transportation route carrying goods and people. It has also been a source of conflict, with several wars fought over its control.

Floating market in Vietnam's Mekong delta.

MEKONG RIVER'S VITAL STATISTICS

In terms of statistics, the Mekong is the longest river in Southeast Asia at about 4,350 kilometres long. It drains more than 810,000 square kilometres of land, stretching from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea south of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. It rises in China's southeastern Qinghai province, flows through Tibet and Yunnan province, then along the border between Myanmar and Laos and between Laos and Thailand. The Mekong River then flows through Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The capital of Laos, Vientiane stands on its banks, as does the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. Much of the drainage area (about three quarters) of the Mekong lies within Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam – the four countries the river traverses on its lower course and the four countries whose culture, agriculture and civilizations have been most associated with and influenced by the Mekong. Among Asian rivers, only the Yangtze and the Ganges are larger.

THE UPPER MEKONG AND THE LOWER MEKONG

The Mekong can be divided into two parts: the Upper Mekong and the Lower Mekong. The Upper Mekong which flows through Laos and China, dipping into Thailand and Myanmar is known for its dramatic natural scenery flowing through steep mountain gorges and jungles.

In contrast, the Lower Mekong is a bustling hub of human activity as it winds through Cambodia and Vietnam, showcasing how people can live harmoniously with nature. In Vietnam it is known as the 'Nine Dragons River' as it splits into nine major tributaries and many smaller rivers and canals in the Mekong Delta. These run through towns and settlements where life revolves around the waterways.

Mekong River map. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

THE BORDERLANDS OF THAILAND AND LAOS

On the Thailand-Laos border, the Mekong River serves not only as a source of food and livelihood for people, but also as a natural boundary marking the (sometimes disputed) border between the two countries. The Mekong has over a hundred small islands, which have been a source of territorial conflict for nearly a century as the two countries dispute who has the right to use the islands and where exactly the boundary is, as the flow of water naturally shrinks and swells. Dam construction and sand mining have also altered the river's flow, which further affects the islands and impacts the balance of the ecosystems, exacerbating the friction.

MEKHONG WHISKY

In 1941, during one contentious period of the Laos border demarcation, Thailand named its now famous 'whisky' after the river. Made from locally grown sugar cane and glutinous rice, it has more in common with rum than whisky. However, it gained popularity at a time when there was a deficit in whisky imports. Recent concerns about the Mekong River drying up prompted promoters of the liquor to announce, "Have no worries about the supply of Mekhong Whisky – no matter what happens to the Mekong River!"

Mekhong 'whisky' – technically a rum, the spirit is Thailand's favourite tipple, named after the river. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

REVERSING THE RIVER

One unique feature of the Mekong River and its confluence with the Tonle Sap arguably enabled the development of the ancient civilization responsible for the world-renowned Angkor Wat. The Tonle Sap River flows southeast from Cambodia's great Tonle Sap Lake and meets the Mekong River near the capital, Phnom Penh. However, for six months of the year, in the monsoon season (typically May to October) the Mekong River floods and causes the water to back up into the Tonle Sap River, reversing its flow and bringing sediments, nutrients and an abundance of fish into the lake, as well as enlarging it by 20 to 40 kilometres.

THE ANCIENT ANGKOR CIVILISATION

Historically, this enabled the Angkor civilisation to develop an elaborate hydraulic complex of canals and pond irrigation systems to water inland rice fields and support one of the largest pre-modern urban populations in the world. The Angkor period began in 802 CE, when King Jayavarman II was crowned and declared 'universal monarch'. The kingdom he founded dominated much of mainland Southeast Asia and lasted until the 15th century.

At its height, its capital, Yasodharapura, is thought to have had a population of over a million, making it one of the most populous cities in the world at that time. The rice-fish diet they lived on continues to this day to be the staple of daily meals throughout Southeast Asia. The city's renowned Hindu-Buddhist temples display a sophisticated level of engineering, construction and artistic achievement. An image of Angkor Wat, the most famous among them, has appeared on the Cambodian flag since the country gained its independence from France in 1953.

UNIQUE SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH TONLE SAP LAKE

Cultural and economic practices have developed based on the Mekong River's predictable seasonal patterns and the unique, symbiotic relationship between Tonle Sap Lake and River and the Mekong River, which is considered a natural wonder of the world. The Mekong River sediment, which has made Tonle Sap Lake one of the most productive fisheries in the world, is highly valued. During the dry season, sediments are resuspended rather than settling permanently at the bottom

Golden lions guard the riverside at Phnom Penh.

of the lake. The nutrients in the sediment feed a surge in algae growth, providing food for fish and other aquatic species. The shallow waters also provide light for fast growth. This seasonal nutrient cycling is critical to the productivity of the lake and its floodplain. Unlike, for example, the Mississippi River in the United States, where maintaining navigation has always been a priority, on Tonle Sap River and Lake, navigation becomes increasingly difficult during the dry season, with only shallow draft boats able to travel between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Plans to change this by dredging a channel have been discussed but caused alarm at the potential impact on the unique and finely balanced ecosystem.

GEOPOLITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Geopolitical and environmental issues are also a concern as Cambodia embarks on a controversial project, funded by China, to build the Funan Techo Canal – a shortcut that will link the Mekong River to the Gulf of Thailand, bypassing and reducing shipping reliance on Vietnam.

The Mekong River is the lifeblood and heart of Southeast Asia and a life-source to at least 65 million people who live within the lower Mekong basin. Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese people have depended on the Mekong's resources for thousands of years and the river forms an integral part of local culture. The profound impact that the Mekong River has on multiple ecosystems is also impossible to overestimate.

Buddhist monks feed the pigeons in the square in front of Phnom Penh's Royal Palace.

THE MEKONG RIVER'S BIODIVERSITY

As well as a vital source of food and income, the river is also one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, home to thousands of plant, mammal, bird and freshwater fish species. These include the critically endangered Mekong catfish, which is the largest freshwater fish in the world and can grow up to three meters in length and weigh over 270 kilograms. Many of the species in the Mekong River Basin are found nowhere else in the world.

When we think of Southeast Asia, we think of the emerald shimmer of the paddy fields of the Mekong River delta and the floating markets and the fishing villages with wooden houses on stilts, typical of the societies around the river and its tributaries. Few places on earth demonstrate so dramatically the fundamental link between humans and the environment. However, this delicate balance between human activity and nature is now under threat from climate-change, pollution, damming and geopolitical activity. Future leaders like those attending the workshop need to be well-prepared to use their skills, knowledge and influence to work together to address these challenges. It behoves us all to do what we can to help. P

Image of Angkor Wat on the Cambodian flag. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

JOYCE JENKINS was a docent at ACM and TPM from 2005-2009. She is currently a member of FOM's Membership Committee and Hospitality Team as well as TEG.

NAMING IT RIGHT

VAIJU KHARÉ JAUNTS THROUGH TOPONYMS THAT CONNOTE AN ELEMENT AND EXPLORES THE UNDERLYING MYTH, HISTORY, NATURAL AND/OR SUPERNATURAL OF THEIR ORIGINS

All images are indicative and sourced from public domain.

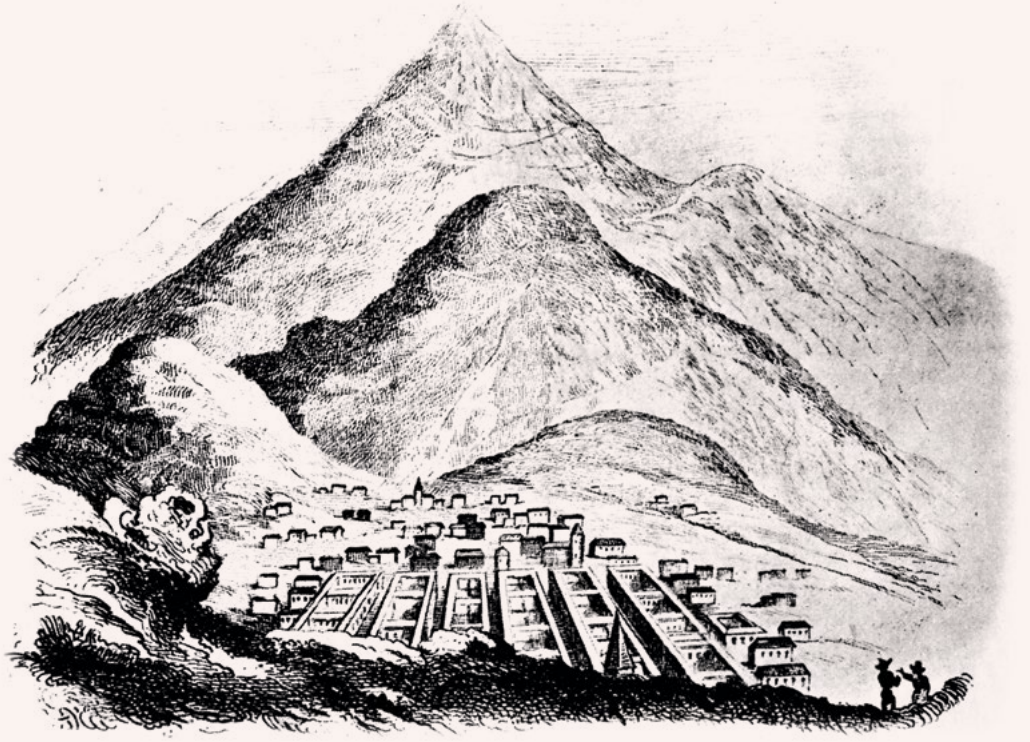
What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet. Happy the rose for I do not subscribe to this sweeping view (pun intended!), romantic, literary and social implications notwithstanding. To me a name is a Name, especially so if it is what a place is called. I often wonder what a name of a place means, and through the long years of travel and work I have always asked for the provenance of the toponym I meet. The unfolding of the meaning or the story behind it brings me closer to the people, the culture, and especially the language, which often is a near-forgotten dialect or connotation. This engagement with place names is a source of immense curiosity and learning. Not only does it always have a wow factor at the end but a continuing sense of discovery, knowing and belonging.

Place names tell us volumes about its history, landscape, people, and aspirations revealing the coexistence of races and languages, unlocking the interlocking narratives encoded in every street and landmark. The self-image of a place and its connection and association with other places is a deep layer a name can reveal. It even echoes the past of colonisation, immigration, nationalism, freedom and identity. A toponym is like a verbal hyperlink to the visual, aural, tactile and emotional experience.

METALLIC INSPIRATIONS

Let me begin with a name close to us right here in Singapore – Bukit Timah. Most of us now know it more as a place to trek, and for the lovely gardens, pools, and wooded ambience. In the Malay Language, Bukit Timah, means 'hill of Tin' or a Tin bearing hill, so Metal. Some say the name comes from the temak trees that wooded this area a long while ago and that 'timah' was the anglicised sound. But tin wins the story of origin, and the first reference to this name is on a map drawn by Philip Jackson the surveyor of public lands in 1828 as part of the Jackson Plan for Singapore. That this area has been a heavy mining area for centuries, first for tin and then for granite, is well documented and evident in the pools and sheer

Top view of the Bukit Timah Hindhede granite quarry.



Silver Mountain in the Andes.

quarry sites that are one of the major attractions for the treks, picnics and the climb to its summit.

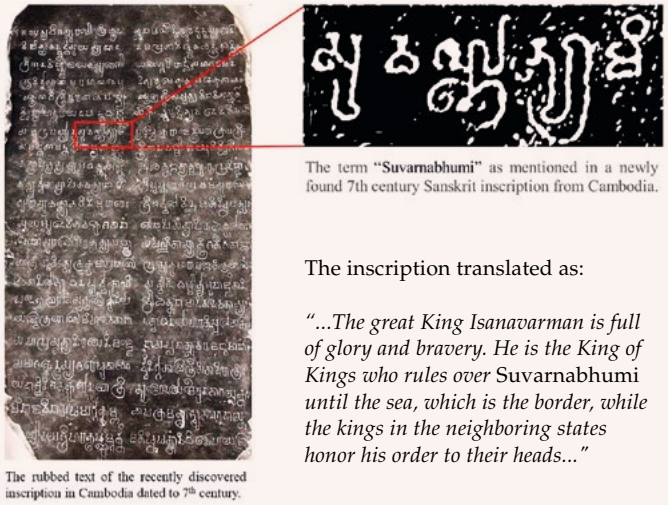
Centuries before and far away from Timah, a Venetian map of 1536 names a certain region, Argentina. Derived from the Italian word to mean 'of silver, or silver covered', this Spanish naming of the region, was associated with the silver mountains legend of the early 16th century. The Sierra de la Plata, Mountain of Silver, was a mythical source of silver in the interior of South America ruled by a so-called White King. The first European to lead an expedition in search of it was a castaway who crossed nearly the entire continent to reach the Andean altiplano. He died from an ambush by the indigenous people on his way back to the coast, but other survivors brought back the precious metal to corroborate this story.

This led to more expeditions, taking the conquistadors deeper into the continent, making it a Spanish colony. An expedition in late 1545 finally found massive silver deposits deep in the Andes, the Cerro Rico de Potosi, which led to the naming of the Silver River, Rio de la Plata and Argentina.

One of the most mythical, mystified and contentious toponyms, that bespeaks another metal, or should I say, a precious one, is *Suvarnabhumi* – the golden land. It is mentioned in ancient Indian Sanskrit and Pali literary epic sources and Buddhist texts like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahavamsa*, the *Milindapanha* and some *Jataka* tales. It is understood by all as a region of maritime trade along the Indian Ocean and as a melting pot of cultures is fairly certain. But where?

Ian Glover, the famed Emeritus Reader in Southeast Asian Archaeology at University of London in his 'Suvarnabhumi: Myth or Reality?' writes, "It is widely accepted in the 21st century that *Suvarnabhumi* as reported in early Indian literature was not a specific location which can be marked on a map. Rather, it was an idealised place, perhaps equivalent to Atlantis in Western history, a distant somewhere to the east of India where traders, sailors, and Buddhists, Jains, and Hindu teachers went to make their fortunes and spread their teachings and bring back gold and other exotic products desired by a rising elite and the wealthy classes at home."

While there is still no consensus, it is largely accepted that *Suvarnabhumi* is a region in insular Southeast Asia or Southern India. There is *Suvarnadwip*, the Golden Island or Peninsula, as if the *bhumi* was not enough of a conundrum for all seekers of such a land. So, it is not surprising to find a surfeit of claimers: Bengal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sumatra, Malay peninsula, Thailand, Java and Cambodia, and a veritable treasure of literary references or inscriptions in languages and scripts indigenous to these lands.



The rubbed text of the recently discovered inscription in Cambodia dated to 7th century.

The term **"Suvarnabhumi"** as mentioned in a newly found 7th century Sanskrit inscription from Cambodia.

The inscription translated as:

"...The great King Isanavarman is full of glory and bravery. He is the King of Kings who rules over Suvarnabhumi *until the sea, which is the border, while the kings in the neighboring states honor his order to their heads..."*

Golden Land in Cambodia Inscription.

Wood Pavilion as restored, Nepal.

LINKED THROUGH WOOD

Kashtamandap means 'Wood pavilion'. Built from the wood of a single tree, it stood on a major trading route between India and China via Tibet. It gave a name to the entire valley, an aspiring kingdom, and now the capital of a Himalayan country. Kathmandu is a corrupt sound of this Kashtamandap. Although its history is uncertain, local tradition says that the three-tier roof and 16-pillar structure was constructed around the 12th century from the wood of a single Sal tree as a pilgrim's halt and was later made into a temple for the Nath yogis linked to the royal family.

The 2015 earthquake of Nepal turned it into a heap of mud and wood and now the restored version retains its wood origin, the architectural features and makes the pavilion a sight to ponder on. The artifacts found in the post-earthquake restoration work confirm the Kashtamandap to be of 7th century. Standing in a courtyard of the King's Palace and facing the temple and residence of the Virgin Goddess, this pavilion is symbolic of a tantric Nepal where kings and yogis together made the history and politics of a land.

FLUID CONNECTIONS

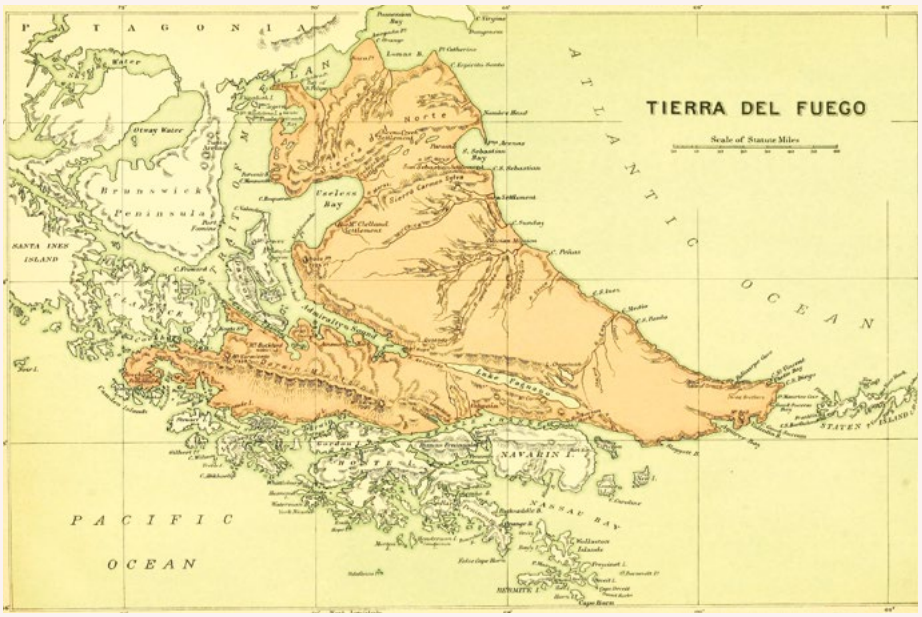
Kashmir, the way the word is spelled and the land called now, has its origin in the Sanskrit *Kasmira* meaning 'Land desiccated from Water.' In a Persian-Arabic alternative etymology, it is *Casimeer* 'the end of Water', or 'where the Water ends.'

Until the mid-19th century just the valley between the Himalaya and the Pir Panjal ranges was called Kashmir but now it refers to a much larger landmass that includes parts of Pakistan, India and China on the high mountainous terrain. With so much of mountain space one forgets the Water Element of the ancient Tethys Sea and the making of the Himalayan ranges itself. As *Heem-alaya*, from the Sanskrit, is the abode of snow, one can see snow as Water too. Himalaya is a toponym of Water element for sure!

FIERY SIGHTINGS

Toponyms that indicate the Fire element have strange sightings as their alibi. The Tierra del Fuego, Land of Fire is an archipelago off the southernmost tip of the South American mainland, across the Strait of Magellan and Siquijor is a Philippine island province. Both these places have the Fire element in their name that was imagined. It is said that the European mariners and expeditions that came with Ferdinand Magellan around 1520 saw thousands of bonfires lit by the local natives and thought the land itself to be spewing Fire. The Spaniards of the colonial period of the Philippines coined the toponym Isla del Fuego, Island of Fire, for this little piece of land due to the glow of a million fireflies that swarmed the *molave* trees, giving the impression of a Fire land.

Aerial photograph of the Himalayas, Ladakh. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Tierra del Fuego map from Richard Crawshay's book, The birds of Tierra del Fuego. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Map of the Philippines, showing the location of Siquijor. Spanish colonials referred to Siquijor as Isla del Fuego.

EARTHY FOUNDATIONS

Our planet itself being called Earth, one would wonder if there were any reason for a toponym meaning earth again! If we take stone, sand, rock and mountain as metonym for earth just for the purpose of this article, then we find an array of place names that denote Earth. Petra, Tashkent, Montana, Liechtenstein and Thar are some of my favourites. To me even the sound of each of these words has that stony hard ground feeling, perhaps because of the 't' and 'th' syllables.

Petra is stone, and this ancient city on the incense trade route of long ago is all monuments, hand chiseled, they say. Tombs and houses, temples and doorways, market stalls and roadside sculptures are all spectacularly carved rose colour sandstone. Liechtenstein is 'bright stone or shiny stone,' and this small alpine place gets its name from a castle made of bright stone rock. Montana is Spanish for mountain, and Thar is a morphed version of *thul*, which in the local language means sand.

LAMENTING LOST TRADITIONS

I often ache for the loss of these beautiful names although understandable and lamentable at the same time. Diminishing folk traditions, loss of oral history, storytelling, residual colonial corruptions, language borrowings, migrations, and so many historical and social processes including the escalation of nationalism, ethnicity and identity issues of our modern world-making has brought on a morphing, complete forgetting or a barren usage of these toponyms. The hidden Element of the Place is yours to open just for yourself, always. P

VAIJU KHARÉ is an FOM Member and an Independent Researcher in International Relations, Traditions of Art, Architecture, Folk, and Comparative Religions of Asia.

Al-Khazneh at Petra.

ANCIENT WEAPONS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA & THEIR ELEMENTAL SYMBOLISM

MARTA GASPAR EXPLORES HOW ANCIENT SOUTHEAST ASIAN WEAPONS, FORGED FROM EARTH, FIRE, WATER, AND METAL, ARE ALSO SACRED SYMBOLS OF POWER AND PROTECTION

Picture a Dong Son burial in Vietnam, where villagers lay bronze axes and drums in a coffin as gifts for the afterlife. These artefacts, forged from the earth's copper and tin, were not mere tools – they symbolised humanity's bond with the elements and the divine.

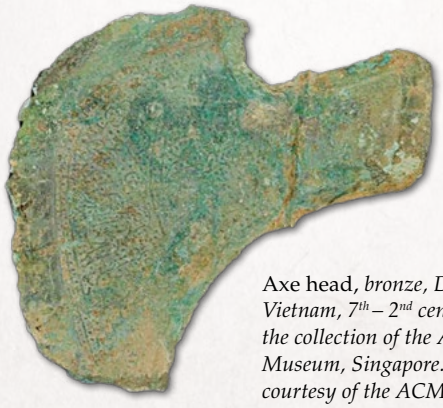
Ngọc Lũ drum, *3rd – 2nd century BCE, bronze, depicting warriors in headdresses carrying spears and daggers, Vietnam National Museum of History, Hanoi. Photo courtesy of Khan Academy.*

In ancient Southeast Asia, weapons were more than instruments of war. They were tied to nature and the elemental forces that shaped the land. From the sacred bronze axes of the Dong Son culture to the ritualistic *kris* daggers of the Malay Archipelago, we will journey through a region where earth, fire, water, and metal meet to create weapons of enduring legacy.

To understand the sacred connection between weapons and the elements, we begin with the earth – the source of life and the foundation of ancient craftsmanship.

EARTH AND ANCESTRY: SHIELDS FOR THE AFTERLIFE

Bronze weapons crafted by Dong Son artisans (7th century BCE – 2nd century CE) were more than functional – they served as shields for the spirit in the afterlife. Buried alongside the dead, these tools reflected a belief in the sacred power of earth's resources. The Dong Son bronze drums, often adorned with images of warriors bearing weapons, also symbolised protection and ancestral guidance.



Axe head, *bronze, Dong Son culture, Vietnam, 7th – 2nd century BCE. From the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. (ACM). Photo courtesy of the ACM.*

Earth was revered as a sacred source, with copper and tin forming the basis of weaponry in cultures like the Dong Son. These weapons were offerings to the spirits, a form of ancestor worship. The bronze drums, adorned with warrior scenes, highlighted the belief that ancestors offered protection and guidance even in war.

While the earth provided the foundation, it was fire that gave life to these creations, transforming raw materials into tools of power and protection.

FIRE AND METAL: WEAPONS BORN FROM FLAMES

Under the glow of fire, Malay blacksmiths forged the *kris*, its wavy blade reflecting the flames that gave it life. Each strike of the hammer wasn't just craft – it was ritual, purifying the weapon and awakening its spirit. The *kris* was believed to carry this fiery essence into battle, protecting its bearer with divine strength.

Traditional beliefs held that a *kris* was 'alive,' its spirit awakened by fire, transforming it into a warrior's sacred ally. Imagine a blacksmith hammering a glowing blade, the sparks flying like tiny stars. This is how the Malay *kris* was born.

(right) Mandau sword, Borneo, 19th century CE. Photo courtesy of Mandarin Mansion Antiques.

(bottom) Keris, *from Sumatra or Malay Peninsula, 19th century CE or earlier. From the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. Photo courtesy of ACM.*

Beyond its function as a weapon, the *kris* held spiritual power. Owners would conduct rituals to 'awaken' the spirit within the blade, invoking blessings for protection or victory in battle. The Javanese have legends that attribute supernatural qualities to the *kris*, where some daggers were thought to contain a *semangat* (spirit) that could curse or protect, depending on the warrior's intentions. This belief illustrates Southeast Asia's animistic roots, where fire symbolised purification and power.

One of the most famous *kris* in Malay legend is the Taming Sari, tied to the legendary warrior Hang Tuah, a hero of the Malacca Sultanate. This *kris*, said to have been forged with mystical rituals, granted its bearer invincibility in battle and symbolised unmatched loyalty and strength. The tale of Hang Tuah and Taming Sari reflects a deep reverence for the *kris* as a sacred object.

The kris was connected to the element of water as it could be used in oaths where one would drink the water in which a talismanic *kris* had been plunged.

The *mandau*, a sword of the Dayak people in Borneo, offers another example of fire's importance. Forged from iron and often decorated with animal bones and feathers, the *mandau* represented earthly and divine connections. The Dayak believed that adorning the blade with natural elements invoked the spirits and forging it in fire was a sacred ritual. In their culture, every *mandau* was unique, its power tied to the spirit of its creator and the natural elements that adorned it.

If fire represented strength and transformation, water symbolised vitality and spiritual connection, flowing through daily life and sacred rituals.

WATER: PROTECTING LIFE AND SPIRIT

For the Dayak people of Borneo, rivers were sacred lifelines, home to spirits believed to offer guidance and protection. Warriors would immerse their spears in the waters before battle, symbolically drawing strength from a river's power.

Flowing patterns on Bornean sword hilts reflected this connection, where water's role extended beyond protection to purification. Rituals involving sacred rivers, like washing weapons or consecrating them before battle, emphasised water's cleansing and life-sustaining properties.

Dayak warriors would often immerse their weapons in river water, a symbolic act to summon protection from water spirits. One tale speaks of a warrior who dipped his spear in the sacred waters before a fierce battle, calling upon the river's spirit for strength.

(left) Dayak warrior in traditional attire carrying a mandau, *Borneo, 19th century CE. Photo courtesy of Forum Auctions.*

(top) Ritual sword of Borneo, 19th century CE, Dallas Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Art of the Ancestors.

Sword (klewang) *with scabbard, Sumatra, 19th century CE, Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (MET). Photo courtesy of the MET.*

The *klewang*, a curved blade used in naval combat, reflects water's dual nature – both nurturing and fierce, like the seas that shaped Southeast Asian communities. The *klewang* was famously used by Acehnese fighters during the colonial Aceh War (1873–1904), where its curved blade proved effective in naval combat. Its use further underscores its association with water as a life-sustaining and protective element.

Beyond their elemental origins, weapons also carried deeper symbolic meanings, connecting warriors to the divine through intricate designs and sacred rituals.

LOOKING FOR THE DIVINE IN WEAPONRY

Across Southeast Asia, weapons were spiritual objects engraved with symbols of fire, water, earth and deities. Cham warriors of Vietnam inscribed sacred symbols on weapons, believing these markings invited divine protection. This practice mirrored beliefs in other Southeast Asian cultures, such as the Javanese *kris*, where engraved patterns connected the bearer to ancestral and spiritual powers.

These weapons were more than physical tools – they embodied the sacred connection between the warrior, the elements, and the spiritual realm. Versions of Dong Son-style axe blades, often adorned with intricate designs, were commonly created as ceremonial offerings or funerary gifts.

These sacred weapons, forged from the elements and adorned with divine symbols, reminds us of the profound reverence ancient Southeast Asian societies had for the natural world.

Inhabitant of the island of Timor *carrying a dagger, 1882, Jacques Étienne Victor Arago, Collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo courtesy of the Rijksmuseum.*

Bronze dagger with human-shaped handle, Dong Son culture, Vietnam, 7th – 2nd century BCE. Photo courtesy of the Vietnam National Museum of History, Hanoi.

Ancient Southeast Asian weapons embody humanity's enduring relationship with nature and the divine. Crafted from earth, fire, water, and metal, they were more than tools – they were sacred creations, offering protection and reflecting the spiritual forces of their time.

Today, as we admire these museum artefacts, we connect with the same elemental forces that once imbued these weapons with life. The reverence for nature, evident in the Dong Son's burial axes, the Malay *kris*, and the Cham spears, resonates across time, reminding us of the enduring bond between humanity and the elements. P

FOR FURTHER READING

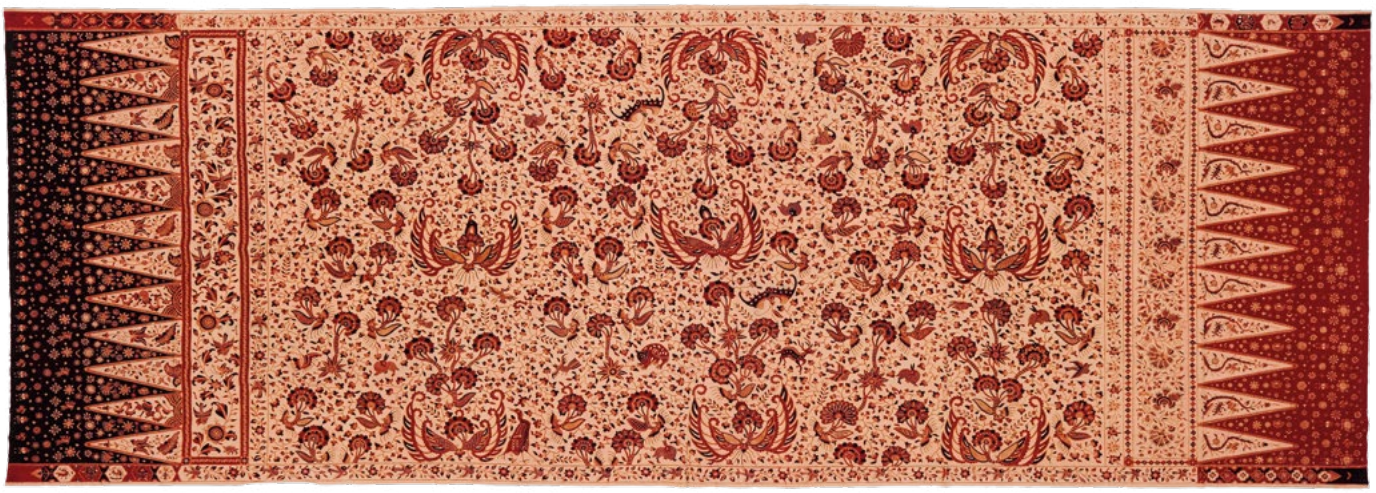
Gardner, G. B. (1936) *Keris and other Malay Weapons*. Orchid Press.

MARTA GASPAR is an FOM member, and an archaeologist by training.

SETBACKS, SERENDIPITY AND SALVATION

PETER LEE RECOUNTS THE UPS AND DOWNS TOWARDS THE DISCOVERY OF THREE GENERATIONS OF INDONESIAN BATIK MASTERS, WHOSE WORKS ARE NOW ON DISPLAY AT THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM

All images are courtesy of the Peranakan Museum.



Kain panjang, *cotton (drawn batik) 1890 – 1925, Nyonya Oeij Soen King. Gift of Ika, Melia, and Inge Hendromartono.*

THREE GENERATIONS OF BATIK MAKERS FROM PEKALONGAN COME TO LIGHT

In 1984, the publication *of Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java* by Inger McCabe Elliot, not only raised the visibility of batik around the world, it also re-introduced the styles of Java's north coast.

The book was instrumental in the rehabilitation of *pesisir* batiks. Whereas *pesisir* batiks had long been reputed to have produced vulgar renditions of the refined, classical prototypes of the royal courts situated at the centre of the island, Elliott's book revealed the modernity and artistry of the unconventional patterns of *pesisir* batiks. Within the book's pages was a fascinating section about three generations of batik makers from Pekalongan, a town that had become Java's chief batik-producing centre by the end of the nineteenth century. Nyonya Oeij Soen King (1871–1950), her daughter-in-law Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing (1895–1966) and her granddaughter Jane Hendromartono (1924–1988), had created some of the most artistic batiks Java ever produced.

Photograph of Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing and Oeij Kok Sing flanking Nyonya Oeij Soen King. Jane Hendromartono stands behind her grandmother alongside her siblings and their spouses, possibly 1940. On loan from Inge Hendromartono.

A TRIBUTE

But how did this little-known family of batik makers end up being featured in Elliott's seminal book? It turns out that Elliott was a client of Hendromartono. Elliott's New York-based company, China Seas, acquired batiks regularly from Hendromartono and other Indonesian producers, for upholstery and dress fabric. In the 1970s, China Seas replicated one of Hendromartono's designs for the American designer Perry Ellis, who in turn created several ensembles with the printed fabric for the American department

Sarong, *cotton (drawn batik), 1933, Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing. Gift of the family of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.*

store Bloomingdales. Apparently, China Seas did this without Hendromartono's knowledge or consent. The outcome was a complicated misunderstanding between Elliot and Hendromartono that was never amicably resolved. Through the intercession of an American friend, Gordon Bishop, Elliott included a tribute to the three generations of the Oeij family in her book, as an act of goodwill. This is not to say that Elliott as a collector, was not also drawn to the amazing story of this family of female batik makers and their unique works.

TURNING STRICT CODIFICATION ON ITS HEAD

The book was groundbreaking, inspiring scholars, dealers and collectors to pay closer attention to *pesisir* batik, a creative counterpoint to the strict codification of the batiks for the royal courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, where patterns had specific names, meanings and functions. Batiks from the *pesisir* were diverse, unconventional and fashionable, constantly evolving and embracing new motifs. Producers were also adept at copying designs not only by other makers in the same town, but also by those from other towns. As important exports of Java, they were also made for different community and geographical markets, and were in demand all over Southeast Asia and beyond.

Celebrated Jakarta interior designer Agam Riadi remembers being fascinated about this unique family story. In 1987, he bought his first piece signed by Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing in one of the stalls in Jakarta's Jalan Surabaya antique market. Agam and his friend the designer Chossy Latu were instrumental in my journey as a batik collector, introducing me for the very first time to a batik dealer in Yogyakarta in 1999. Elliot's book was also a powerful inspiration for me, and discovering the story of the three generations of the Oeij family in its pages was eye-opening and exciting.

PRECIOUS COLLECTIONS LOST AND SAVED

Agam and I built up our collections over time and kept them in the safety of our homes, but the vicissitudes of the Oeij family's own collection were quite different. The precious group of Nyonya Oeij Soen King's and Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing's works were stored in a wardrobe in a bedroom in the family house on Jalan Blimbing in Pekalongan's Chinese district. During the riots of 1966, the family's collection of batik was moved for safety reasons to the home of family friend Chamid Yasin. His son Muhammad Sahlan remembers that the batiks filled an entire room. Later in 1998, a large group of batiks made by Hendromartono that had been stored by her daughter Melia in Jakarta was looted during the civil unrest that led to President Suharto's resignation.

What remained of the collection was divided among Hendromartono's three daughters, Ika, Melia and Inge Hendromartono, who in 2011 began to think about its long-term legacy. Fortuitously, Peranakan Museum donor, Father Robert Wowor, a well-known and highly regarded Franciscan friar in Jakarta, introduced the curators of the Peranakan Museum to the sisters. I had been trying for years to meet the family and Father Robby's introduction was serendipitous.

A JOURNEY OF FRIENDSHIP AND TRUST

It took several visits to understand and document the collection and for the family to arrive at an agreement about giving their collection to the Peranakan Museum. As encouragement, I offered to donate my own family's collection of batiks made by their family.

Eventually, in 2017, a hundred batiks were donated by the sisters, and as I had promised, thirty-six examples from my family's collection were given to the Peranakan Museum in 2024.

Earlier this year, while visiting Agam Riadi to view his collection of twelve batiks made by the Oeijs and Hendromartono, he unexpectedly offered to donate them to the Museum as well.

Through a varied and sometimes troubled journey, a total of one hundred and forty eight batiks that were made in the Oeij family workshop in Jalan Blimbing, Pekalongan and in workshops of various Javanese collaborators in the same town, have found their way to the Peranakan Museum.

Sarong, *1941, cotton (drawn batik), Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing with Jane Hendromartono. Gift of the family of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.*

Kain panjang, *cotton (drawn batik), 1948 – 1950s, Jane Hendromartono. Signed: Batik Kesenian / Liem Siok Hien / Kudus. Gift of Ika, Melia, and Inge Hendromartono.*

OUR STORY TODAY

All of this allowed me and the exhibition's co-curators Naomi Wang and Darryl Lim from the Asian Civilisations Museum, to tell an untold story about three exceptional batik artists. To honour their status as artists, they have been identified in the style they adopted as makers of batik. Hence although their given names at birth were Liem Loan Eng, Kho Tjing Nio and Oeij Djien Nio, they are celebrated as Nyonya Oeij Soen King, Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing, and Jane Hendromartono.

Nyonya is an interesting word that, like all things Peranakan, has a spectrum of meanings. It can refer to a Peranakan woman, or be an alternative term for Peranakan (with a gender bias, such as in Nyonya needlework, or Nyonya cooking), or it can mean Mrs. Nyonya Oeij Soen King. Regardless of title, Nyonya Oeij Soen King produced batik at the highest end of the market from about 1890 to 1920: bespoke pieces perfectly rendered with natural dyes and original abstract patterns that defied convention.

Her daughter-in-law Nyonya Oeij Kok Sing catered to a similar elite clientele but worked with the latest European synthetic dyes to create exceptional batiks with exuberant patterns, quirky, individualistic motifs, and extraordinary colour combinations (mustard green and electric blue for example).

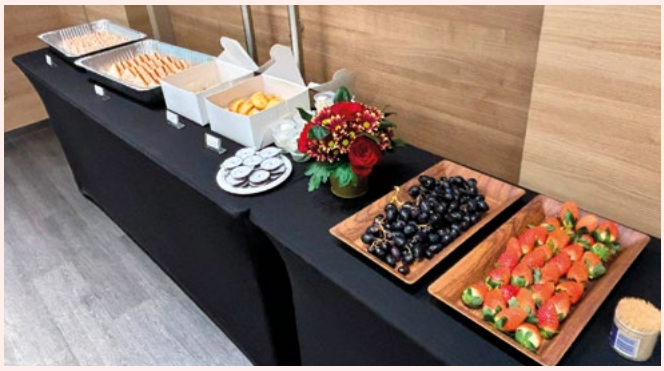
Her granddaughter Jane Hendromartono was the most inventive and versatile of the three, creating a full range of batiks – from unbelievably fine and innovative versions for her mother's clients, to pieces in the exuberant new Batik Indonesia style initiated by President Sukarno, to examples reviving her mother's and grandmother's designs for American buyers, and even to mass produced block-printed fabric for a global network of retailers and manufacturers.

Their fascinating lives and art are told in *Batik Nyonyas: Three Generations of Art and Entrepreneurship* at the Peranakan Museum (until 31 August 2025) and in the fully-illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition.

Kain panjang, *cotton (drawn batik), 1958, Jane Hendromartono. Signed: Liem Siok Hien / Pekalongan – Java / '58.On loan from Inge Hendromartono.*

PETER LEE is an art historian and Guest Curator of the *Batik Nyonyas* special exhibition at the Peranakan Museum, and co-author of *Batik Nyonyas: Three Generations of Art and Entrepreneurship (2024)*. He publishes widely on batik textiles and Peranakan fashion.

THE YEAR THAT WAS



A feast by Paroma Sen and floral arrangement by Rupa Tamsitt.

Stephanie Lyser, Lee Chiew Leong, Clara Chan and Caroline Oh having a quick catch-up.

ROBYN LLOYD REFLECTS ON FOM'S 21ST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM), 5TH DECEMBER 2024, HELD AT THE ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS MUSEUM

This year FOM turned 46 years old, the undisputed grand dame of museum guiding services in Singapore. As FOM President Ms Hong Leng Lee reminded the members present at the AGM, over the years, to its great benefit, FOM has become a multicultural and diverse community. Our membership as of 30 September stood at 1,586, representing 46 nationalities. While we bade fond farewells to many members leaving Singapore this past financial year (Oct 2023 – Sep 2024), we welcomed 348 brand new members. This brings a breadth of experience, but also new perspectives, to our core mission to guide at Singapore's museums, heritage institutions and trails.

In her President's Report, Ms Lee recounted highlights of the year. The statistics she shared were impressive - FOM docents, including our Japanese Docents team (JD), conducted a whopping 5,409 tours for 43,198 visitors from Singapore and around the globe. Not to mention the eight special exhibitions that FOM docents guided at various institutions.

As in every year, we continued to recruit and train the next generation of docents. A total of 103 freshly minted graduates joined our guiding teams at Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), National Museum of Singapore (NMS), Changi Chapel and Museum, Indian Heritage Centre, Chinatown Heritage Trails, Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails, STPI – Creative Workshop and Gallery, Gillman Barracks and JD. At the time of the AGM, 78 trainee docents were immersed in training at ACM, NMS, the Peranakan Museum and JD, and the co-ordinators for our programmes commencing in January 2025 busy recruiting trainees.

Because volunteers are the lifeblood of our organisation, the most important event on the FOM calendar is the one held to recognise and celebrate them. Our Volunteer Appreciation Night for 2024 was themed FOM Bollywood. Around 200 FOM volunteers dressed in splendid colours and Indian fashion grooved to the DJ's Bollywood beats at the Tanglin Club. Sixty volunteers were awarded service PINs for their contribution to FOM. The 2024 Salome de

Priya Seshadri, Shriya Narula, Mathangi Venkatesh, Millie Phuah and Kalyani Kausikan sharing a moment of joy and laughter.

Meeting in progress.

Decker award was presented to Tang Siew Ngoh for her passion for volunteering, respect for others, and selfless sharing of knowledge in her 10 years with FOM.

Of course, apart from guiding and docent training, FOM hosted many other activities to engage our membership in 2024. FOM's flagship Monday Morning Lecture and Friday with Friends public lecture series continued to explore Asian topics encompassing a wide range of member interests. Our other activity groups ran programmes for members with passions as diverse as Asian textiles, books, films, conducting research, food, choir singing, local excursions and international tours.

Behind the scenes, our technology platform and website were given a refresh. Notable enhancements include instant credit notification for PayNow payments and, in a win for the environment, a digital membership card to replace our plastic cards.

Definitely not behind the scenes is our PASSAGE magazine. To foster a stronger sense of ownership, many new and first-time writers were onboarded and the range of topics broadened to appeal to a wider audience. And as always, PASSAGE served as a record keeper of FOM's memories, committing them to print in every issue.

FOM maintained its philanthropic commitment through the FOM-National Heritage Board (NHB) Heritage Grant, which awards two NHB staff persons a stint at a world leading museum. This year the grants,

2024 Council (Outgoing) – Rupa Tamsitt, Karen Ng, Linda Lim, Srivalli Sastri-Kuppa, Tabitha Manresa, Lee Hong Leng, Robyn Lloyd, Michelle Lim, Larissa Wiegele, Paroma Sen and Millie Phuah. Missing in the picture: Jyoti Ramesh.

2025 Council (Incoming) – Tabitha Manresa, Darly Furlong, Rupa Tamsitt, Heike Friedrich, Lee Hong Leng, Andrea Baker, Paroma Sen, Karen Ng, Larissa Wiegele, Jyotsna Mishra. Missing in the picture: Linda Lim and Stephanie Lyser.

NHB-FOM grant recipient, Muhammad Hafiz Bin Saiful Imran giving a presentation at the AGM.

which are matched by NHB, went to Muhammad Hafiz Bin Saiful Imran at the Malay Heritage Centre, and Grace Lau Hsiao Hui at the Founder's Memorial. Mr Imran joined the AGM to share insights from his placement with the Manchester Histories Festival team for two weeks last May.

Finally, with the results of e-voting in the 2024 FOM election announced – all motions were carried by the membership and candidates for the 2024-25 Council duly elected – it remained for Ms. Lee to thank the previous Council for its work, pronounce FOM to be in good standing and financial shape and declare the 21st AGM closed.

That's a wrap for FOM's 46th year, here's to creating more FOM memories in our 47th.

ROBYN LLOYD was the 2024 FOM Elections Administrator and a former FOM Council representative and co-ordinator of KGHT.

FOM LEADERS TRAVEL TO THAILAND (VIA TANGLIN MALL)

LARISSA WIEGELE REPORTS ON FOM'S ANNUAL LEADERSHIP DINNER

In early November, FOM hosted its 14th annual dinner to celebrate the dedicated volunteer efforts of our leadership community. Held at Sarai Fine Thai restaurant in Tanglin Mall, this event brought together nearly 60 attendees, all of whom contribute tirelessly to the success of the organisation.

The evening began with a warm welcome at the door by Jariyam and Chong Teck, the wonderful welcome team. Inside, there was a happy buzz of conversation as, over a glass of wine and specialty mocktails, members caught up with old friends and made new ones. After drinks, guests were called to their designated tables as FOM President, Hong Leng, addressed everyone in a heartfelt speech.

The meal was superb. Over four courses, guests were taken to Thailand with a selection of exquisite Thai appetisers, followed by a classic tom yum soup and then, for the main course, a beautifully grilled sirloin, served Thai style (of course). There was also a mouthwatering vegetarian option, featuring delightfully presented meatless courses.

Ayano Nishimura, Susan Chong, Katherine Lim, Millie Phuah, Jayashree Srinath and Karen Ng

Durriya Dohadwala, Andrea Baker, Rupa Tamsitt, Darly Furlong, Melissa Nesbitt, Priya Sen and Abha Kaul

Shradha Nayan, Siew Ngoh Tan, Gill Cruikshank, Jeffrey Tan and Susan Chong

Linda Kawaratani, Jeff Doherty, Gill Cruikshank, Tabitha Manresa and Gisella Harrold

Jutta Schutte, Yukiko Kozu, Mathangi Venkatesh, Darly Furlong, Lee Hong Leng, Robyn Lloyd and Yvonne Sim

Priya Seshadri, Durriya Dohadwala, Siew Ngoh Tan, Michelle Lim, Andrea Baker, Mythili Devi S. L and Anna Thomas

Jutta Schutte, Priya Seshadri, Mathangi Venkatesh, Tabitha Manresa, Gisella Harrold, Lee Hong Leng and Angie Ng

Jeffrey Tan, Clara Chan, Isabel Telford, Linda Lim, Heike Friedrich and Vanessa Spencer

Finishing it all off was – what else? – the delicious traditional mango sticky rice. The smoky coconut cream added a Sarai twist to this classic.

Adding to the fun, Council Representative for Museums, Tabitha, introduced a light-hearted game, encouraging guests to share surprising facts about themselves with their table mates. This allowed them to connect on a new level, from discovering they shared mutual hobbies to uncovering similar passions to learning about unique travel destinations. It wasn't long before laughter filled the room!

At 10pm, the event came to a close, but there was one last special treat in store. The Marketing team had put together a beautifully packed and thoughtful gift bag for everyone with a selection of products guaranteed to bring a touch of luxury to their homes as well as serving as a reminder of a happy evening.

Everyone left feeling truly appreciated and thankful to be part of such a wonderful community. Special thanks to Paroma, Council Representative for Volunteer and Member Appreciation, for organising such a successful event, and to all those who supported her in pulling the evening together. As we look ahead to another year, the dedication of our volunteers continues to inspire. Here's to many more years of friendship, laughter and shared success!

Millie Phuah, Lee Hong Leng, Paroma Sen and Tabitha Manresa

Ikumi Fushimi, Sayumi Matsubara, Yukiko Kozu and Ayano Nishimura

Chong Teck and Jariyah Yusoff

Linda Lim and Ikumi Fushimi

Effie Rigopoulou and Isabel Telford

Shriya Narula, Jyotsna Mishra, Priya Seshadri and Paroma Sen

LARISSA WIEGELE is Council Representative for Communications as well as a docent at NMS.

BE ENTHRALLED BY OLD SHANGHAI SCENES THROUGH UNIQUE FIGURINES

TALIA WEBB CHATS WITH IVAN MACAUX TO UNCOVER THE INTRIGUING STORY BEHIND A COLLECTION OF UNIQUE WOODEN FIGURINES

All images by Philippe Archer, courtesy of Ivan Macaux, unless otherwise stated.

As you enter the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) special exhibition, *Pagoda Odyssey 1915: From Shanghai to San Francisco*, you will discover a plethora of small, wooden figurines that will transport you back to a bygone era.

Chest with wooden figurines.

LET US FIRST LOOK INTO THE HISTORY OF THE FIGURINES. HOW DID THESE FIGURINES COME INTO YOUR FAMILY?

These figurines were a gift from the Tushanwan Jesuit orphanage of Shanghai to my great- grandfather, Admiral Jules Le Bigot, who was the Commander-in-Chief of the French Navy Forces in the Far East region in the late 1930s. In the battle between Japan and China that broke out in Shanghai in August 1937, he prevented the Japanese forces from bombing the French Concession of Shanghai and the districts nearby where an orphanage stood. He thus saved thousands of Chinese residents from artillery fire.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE CULTURAL OR HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE FIGURINES?

This collection is firstly a unique testimony to the artistic skills of these orphanage pupils. It's hard to believe that they were made by children and teenagers! The orphans were mostly trained to make statues of the Virgin Mary or Christ on the Cross for the Jesuit missionary churches in Asia, but they used to offer these tiny figurines of local people from time to time in addition to "occidental figures." Some were found in the United Sates or even at the Vatican - but never so many as in my great-grandfather's collection. It must have represented a huge amount of work. Its historical significance is also important. It is a genuine representation of a society – Shanghai at the beginning of the 20th century – that was changing completely under the effect of multiple influences, especially western influence. Look for instance how all the "city notables" wear sunglasses! It's a mix between tradition and modernity.

YOU HAD DISCOVERED THE COLLECTION DURING YOUR CHILDHOOD. DID YOU OR ANYONE IN YOUR FAMILY PLAY WITH THESE FIGURINES AS CHILDREN? IF SO, CAN YOU SHARE SOME MEMORIES?

Teacher and his student: dictation.

Nobody ever played with them! They would have made fabulous Playmobil toys though. When I was a child, they were kept away from the children by my grandfather who locked them in his office. He also decided not to exhibit them in a vitrine, but to keep them stored in the original trunk, so as to preserve them from light, humidity and from the temptation of his grandchildren! I only remember that at a few special occasions in my childhood, the figurines were brought out of the darkness, and we

Standing cangue cage.

Boy with watermelon peddler.

Imperial courier on his camel.

could have a look at them, observing each detail with a flashlight. The "Chinese tortures," especially fascinated all the youngsters.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE FIGURINE IN THE COLLECTION? WHY IS IT YOUR FAVOURITE?

Are you asking me to choose one among all of my children? Joking aside, I have a deep affection for all the kids in the collection. The watermelon eater, the lesson reciter, the kite carrier – I love the feeling of both innocence and poetry they arouse. I also have tenderness for the few that are a little less sophisticated (it is all relative), the camel for instance. I like to imagine they were made by the dunce in the back row of the classroom.

LET US TALK ABOUT YOUR REDISCOVERY OF THE FIGURINES. HOW DID YOU BECOME REACQUAINTED WITH THE FIGURINES?

Since the death of my grandparents, nobody had really paid any more attention to the figurines and all the memorabilia and souvenirs brought back from adventures by Jules. All these were stored in our family house in the South of France, between Marseille and Nice. So, in 2011, I decided to take the trunk to Paris where I live, to be able to document them more easily. A week after, the room where the figurines had been stored for decades suffered water damage – maybe it was a sign I had to take care of them! I knew nothing about China, so I simply searched "Historian Shanghai" on the internet and sent pictures to a dozen experts. Some replied, notably Christian Henriot, a famous French sinologist and expert on Shanghai's history. We decided to investigate together and write a book.

PLEASE TAKE ME THROUGH THE PROCESS OF UNLOCKING THE MYSTERIES OF THESE FIGURINES AND THEIR BACKGROUND.

Our first lead was a label on the trunk, written in French, that read "*Orphelinat de Tu Se We*, Shanghai." A date followed: June 23, 1938. I interviewed older members of my family to get clues, then I went to Shanghai to visit the former orphanage. On his part, Christian dug into Jesuit archives, military records and diplomatic exchanges to get the whole picture.

LET US LOOK INTO HOW THE FIGURINES FOUND THEIR WAY TO THE PUBLIC EYE. WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO SHOW THESE FIGURINES AT THE ACM SPECIAL EXHIBITION?

I have always had the wish to share widely the memory of my ancestor. The collection had been shown in France, but never in Asia. The meeting I had in Paris with Kevin Lam, ACM curator, finally convinced me to take the risk of transporting these very fragile objects to the other side of the world. My figurines are in good hands at ACM.

Ivan Macaux and his figurines at the Asian Civilisations Museums Special Exhibition: Pagoda Odyssey 1915: From Shanghai to San Francisco. *Photo by Talia Webb.*

WHAT DO YOU HOPE VISITORS WILL LEARN OR FEEL WHEN THEY SEE YOUR FIGURINES ON DISPLAY?

Of course, I hope they will learn more about Admiral Jules Le Bigot. But beyond that, I hope that the younger ones will learn more about old Chinese traditions, techniques, styles, jobs, etcetera. I also hope these scenes will allow the older ones to recall memories. When I came to Singapore with the collection for the opening of the exhibition, I spent an hour sitting in a corner to observe visitors' reactions while discovering the figurines. It was the best reward for all that work!

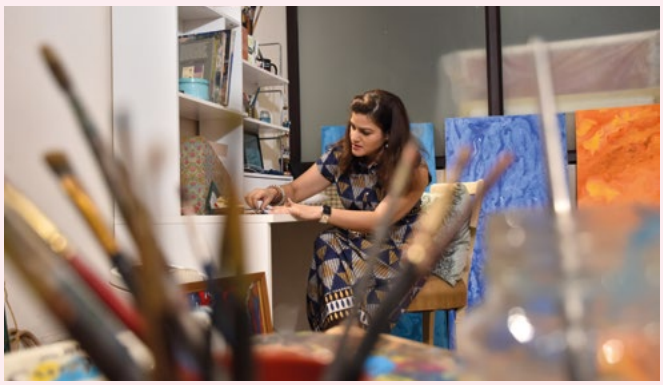
TALIA WEBB is a docent at Asian Civilisations Museum, Changi Chapel and Museum and The Peranakan Museum.

PALETTES, PAGES AND PASSION – STORIES IN COLOUR

GAYATRI SHASHI TAMPI ENGAGES WITH PARUL MEHRA – ARTIST, WRITER AND PASSAGE NEWS EDITOR – TO DELVE INTO THE WORK THAT DEFINES HER

Images by Parul Mehra.

Parul Mehra's *oeuvre* is vibrant and ethereal – capturing a world that is both mystical and profound. Our meeting in a quaint café revealed her as intuitive and colourful in spirit, mirroring the essence of her work. With over 400 artworks, 40 shows and more than 15 solo exhibitions, her art graces private collections globally.



Parul at work in the studio.

LET'S START WITH YOUR ASSOCIATION WITH FOM AND PASSAGE.

In 2023, a visit to the Indian Heritage Centre sparked my interest in FOM. At Open Morning, I met Oksana Kokhno, who connected me to Tim Clark and Dawn Marie Lee, the Co-Editors of PASSAGE at the time. Our discussion led to my role as a News Editor. I also penned features on notable FOM members like the Salome De Decker awardee, Hilary White, and others. PASSAGE reignited my passion for writing, truly enriching my journey.

YOUR BODY OF WORK IS REMARKABLE. CAN YOU PLEASE TELL US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY IN MIXED MEDIA ART?

I hold a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Sushant School of Art and Architecture, New Delhi with 8-10 years of experience in construction and interiors. Over time, I realised that my true passion is art. I embraced diverse tools and techniques that defy conventional rules of themes and colours. Since 2013, I've exhibited my paintings and eventually forayed into mixed media. Experimenting with pastels and found objects sparked a new creative path. I was keen to enhance my art-based learning and refined my practice through a course in mixed media at LASALLE College of the Arts.

WILL YOU WALK US THROUGH YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS FROM CONCEPTION TO COMPLETION?

Before each show, I spend considerable time in visualising and planning concepts, selecting only ones that truly resonate with me. Conceptualising takes 70 per cent of my creative process, with execution being the quicker phase. I sometimes enjoy browsing through platforms like SAATCHI and ARTLING, where I display my work.

Roses are wild *(2013), the cover of Parul's debut art catalogue.*

Nature is my primary inspiration and I play around with diverse materials, textures and colours. I incorporate elements from everyday life into my art – whether it is the sky, the texture of a wall, nail art or even croissants from this café. I'm also inspired by the work of artists like Raja Ravi Varma, Hilma af Klint and Gustav Klimt. Art is my passion!

WHICH OF YOUR PAINTINGS RESONATES WITH YOU THE MOST?

My favourite artwork, *Roses are wild*, depicts life blossoming into roses. Handcrafted without tools, it was selected by my team from 50 artworks to grace the cover of my debut art catalogue in 2013.

Perfect Attunement *(2023), the first in Parul's two-part interpretation of String Theory.*

Perfect Attunement and *Primordial Truth* express my interpretation of string theory in physics, illustrating the resonance of nature's five primordial elements. These pieces explore their spiritual connection to individuals and were featured as a two-part series at the Visual Arts Centre, Singapore.

Primordial Truth *(2023), the second part in the series.*

THERE IS INDEED A SPIRITUAL, THIRD DIMENSION TO YOUR PAINTINGS.

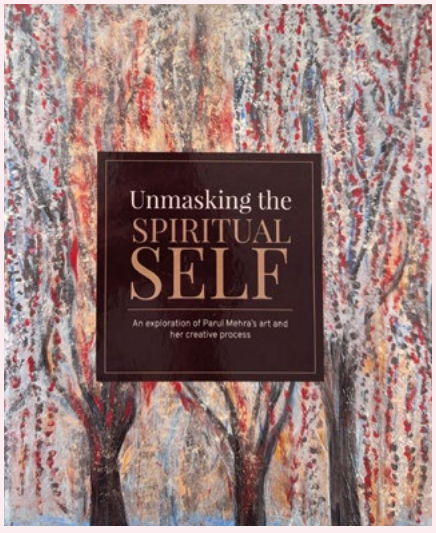
A decade ago, I was drawn to Buddhism. I felt its grounding effects. Meditation and Reiki have also helped me in clarifying my thoughts. These practices have profoundly shaped, and continue to influence, my expression.

Seasonal Symphonies by Nature *(2024) was displayed in Ion Orchard Gallery, Singapore.*

The Dream Swim *(2018) was exhibited in India Habitat Centre, New Delhi.*

THE BOOK, *UNMASKING THE SPIRITUAL SELF* EXPLORES YOUR CANVASSES THROUGH A SPIRITUAL LENS. HOW DID IT COME TO BE?

During Covid, I participated in online projects for Singapore Red Cross and Save the Children Foundation to raise funds. However, I missed live interactions with clients. At a crossroads, I decided to document my artistic journey in a book with the help of my husband and a team. The book, featuring 128 paintings, poems and writings was launched at National Library, Singapore with over 100 people in attendance. It has been distributed to 15 countries. The second edition is coming soon.



Unmasking the spiritual Self - *the book on Parul's expressions in art.*

HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE AI'S IMPACT ON ART?

That's a great question. AI can enhance creativity, but it is disheartening when it tries to replace art by mass-producing it with a click of a key. It completely devalues the originality and hard work of artists.

Plagiarism is also a major concern, highlighting the need for stronger copyright protection, especially in a global context. Ultimately, nothing can replace the authenticity of human creativity!

WHICH ARE YOUR FAVOURITE MUSEUMS?

The National Gallery Singapore is captivating, while the Victoria and Albert Museum, London has stunning aesthetics. My favourite is the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, though I also cherish the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi.

CAN YOU SHARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS WITH US?

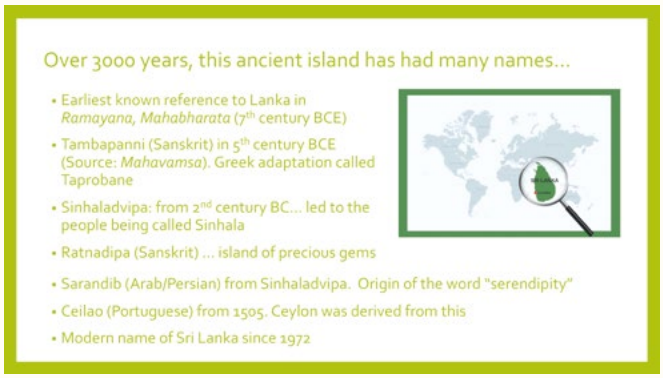
I am balancing several projects, including prepping for Design Fair Asia and furthering my art-driven venture, Divine Creations Collective. I'm also training in art therapy to promote healing through creative counselling. I'm passionate about infusing creativity and art into every aspect of my life!

GAYATRI SHASHI TAMPI is a FOM docent at the Indian Heritage Centre.

SRI LANKA: GEM OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

GENEVIEVE BONG AND **AZRA MOIZ** MAKE A SERENDIPITOUS JOURNEY

All photographs by the authors.



Island of many names over millennia.

In September 2024, FOM members explored the splendours of Sri Lanka's rich heritage and culture and each leaving with their own unique memories.

ARCHITECTURE AND GEOFFREY BAWA

We started the tour doing homage to Geoffrey Bawa, a prominent Sri Lankan architect associated with the Tropical Modernism style. Bawa was the most influential Asian architect of his generation. He adapted his designs to geography and climate, a ground-breaking approach for its time. We visited some of Bawa's creations – his house and Paradise Road café both in Colombo, his country estate Lunuganga and *Seema Malaka* on Lake Beira. We also stayed at the Bawa-designed Kandalama Hotel, famous for its pioneering design and sustainable practices.

The FOM group visited Geoffrey Bawa's Colombo home.

ANCIENT KINGDOMS AND BUDDHISM

Buddhism has shaped Sri Lanka for over two millennia. It was introduced in 247 BCE, when the Indian emperor Asoka sent missionaries who converted Sri Lanka's king to Buddhism.

The 14 metre reclining Buddha statue at Dambulla Caves.

DAMBULLA CAVES

A series of five caves, Dambulla contains the largest Buddhist rock temples in Sri Lanka. The centrepiece is a 14-metre reclining Buddha statue hewn entirely out of rock. The cave has a carved drip line to channel away rainwater and keep the interiors dry – an example of advanced engineering from the ancient world.

ANURADHAPURA AND POLONNARUWA

Anuradhapura was the first of Sri Lanka's kingdoms and its capital for over a thousand years. It was here that the daughter of Emperor Asoka presented a sapling from the sacred *bodhi* tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment to Sri Lanka's king. It was planted and still stands here today. This is the world's oldest human-planted tree, with a known planting date and recorded history.

FOM group at the Aukana standing Buddha statues built in the 5th century CE and standing 12 metres tall.

The Thuparamiya was the first known stupa built in Sri Lanka around 2nd century BCE and is said to contain the relics of the Buddha himself.

On our way to ascend Sigiriya's rock fortress.

Monasteries once abounded here. Fa Hsien, the Chinese Buddhist monk visited in the 5th century CE and wrote that 12,000 monks lived in Anuradhapura. Towering stupas are abundant – Ruwanwelisaya stupa towers 103 metres high and Jetavanaramya reaches 72 metres.

Polonnaruwa was the second capital of Sri Lanka from 11-13th centuries CE. It features a unique *vatadage* temple – a circular design constructed around a small stupa protected by a wooden roof on pillars with four Buddha statues facing the cardinal points, symbolising enlightenment spreading in all directions. At the entrance is a superb 'moonstone' – a semi-circular carved stone 'doormat' with symbolic carvings.

The fabulous carved 'moonstone' at the Vatadage at Polonnaruwa.

WATER ENGINEERING

The ancient civilisations of Sri Lanka were experts in water-management. They built tanks or reservoirs (called *wewa*) over a thousand years ago to irrigate farmlands, which are still in use today. We had a lovely lunch alongside the massive *Parakrama Samudra* or Sea of Parakrama tank.

SIGIRIYA

This is the famous fortress built by King Kashyapa in the 5th century CE. Kashyapa seized the throne by overthrowing his father and usurping it from his brother, the rightful heir. He built a fortress atop Sigiriya to protect against attacks, but his brother returned with an army from South India and captured the kingdom 18 years later.

The climb to the summit looked daunting, but we were rewarded with fabulous vistas at the top. The site is also host to extraordinary rock frescoes dating from the 5th century CE, depicting beautiful women dancing and bearing offerings.

WILDLIFE, SPICES AND GEMSTONES

We took a jeep safari at Minneriya Park which has the highest concentration of wild elephants in Asia. It was an exciting experience to observe elephants in their natural habitat, against a stunning background of lakes and hills.

We also explored the multitude of spices that put Sri Lanka on ancient spice-trading routes dating over a thousand years. This included tasting the unique white tea, harvested based on an ancient Chinese tradition where virgins cut tea leaves with golden scissors into a golden bowl. Today, harvesters cut tea leaves without any human skin contact to maintain the integrity of the tea leaves. We also observed the harvesting of cinnamon, noting the Sri Lanka variety has a sweeter flavour than other varieties.

Sri Lanka produces over 70 varieties of gemstones - sapphires are the most famous but others include rubies, citrines, garnets, topaz, tourmalines and more. These are much in demand.

The trip's highlights were many – the fabulous Sigiriya, the elephants, Dambulla Caves, the ancient citadels of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, the bullock cart ride, Bawa's Lunuganga and the very charming Galle fort.

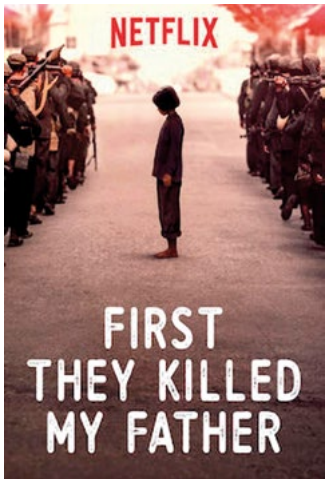
Elephants in the wild at Minneriya Park.

GENEVIEVE BONG is a secret historian at heart, enjoys exploring new places and occasionally can be found guiding at the ACM. **AZRA MOIZ** is an NMS docent, organises study tours, and is a foodie.

HISTORY REVISITED THROUGH A CINEMATIC LENS

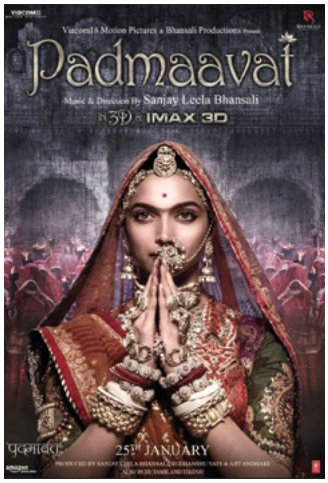
VAISHALI TANEJA RELATES HOW THE ASIAN FILM STUDY GROUP RELIVED THE PAST

The theme for the second season of the Asian Film Study Group was *Reliving the Past*. This theme was a promise to revisit history and experience historic events and regimes across Asia, through a cinematic lens. The history we learn in textbooks is a broad depiction of events, focusing on timelines and historical outcomes. Rarely do they consider the societal context, human perspective, power struggles and personal experiences of the individuals undergoing those tumultuous times. Films offer a more nuanced view of historical events, focusing on individual stories and emotional depth, thereby uncovering layers of human emotion that leave a lasting impression on audiences.



Poster from Fandango.

Poster from IMDb.com.



Poster from Fandango.

Poster from IMDb.com.

Our group of ten members are all passionate about cinema. The first film we watched was *First They Killed My Father*, based on Loung Ung's gripping memoir about the deadly Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978. Told through the eyes of a seven-year-old girl, the film unfolds a riveting narrative of war crimes and the triumph of the human spirit. Although it was a difficult watch, it sparked passionate discussions about the broader historical context, socio-political dynamics and human resilience.

Next, we chose the Japanese animated film *Grave of the Fireflies*, by Isao Takahata. This profoundly beautiful and heartbreaking film depicts the struggles of two Japanese siblings for survival in post-World War II Japan. Despite its tragic ending, the bond between the siblings and the emotional connection they share make it a powerful viewing experience, reminding us of the deeply human scars suffered by ordinary Japanese people as a result of the war.

The third film shifted gears with the visually opulent *Padmaavat*, set in 13th century India. This film tells a story of honour, valour and obsession, focusing on the Sultan of India, Alauddin Khilji, who becomes obsessed with the beauty of Queen Padmavati and wages war on the Rajput kingdom.

Our fourth film broke from the trend of intense war narratives. *A Taxi Driver* tells the story of a taxi driver who inadvertently becomes involved in the Gwangju Uprising while ferrying a German journalist to report on the political turmoil.

These selections provide a glimpse into our diverse and eclectic choice of films, spanning period dramas, regime stories, war aftermaths and socio-political themes. We are excited to explore pieces of history that often go unrecognized in textbooks, learning through stories that resonate on a deeply human level.

VAISHALI TANEJA is the Activity Coordinator for the Asian Film Study Group, 2024.

Friends of the Museums Singapore

Who We Are

FOM is a volunteer, non-profit organisation delivering a journey of discovery into Asian art, history and culture to our members.

Membership is open to all who share these passions.

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Meet with fellow cinema-lovers fortnightly to discuss and enjoy classics and new releases with Asian themes.

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