PASSAGE

FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS SINGAPORE

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Ornamental

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ON THE COVER

This early 20th century Peranakan mourning brooch, on view at the Peranakan Museum, is more than mere ornamentation. Through the symbolic use of silver and semi-precious stones, mourning jewellery served to quietly, but beautifully, mark a woman's three-year grieving period. Learn why silver was preferred over gold and discover the stories behind the jewels in *Threads of Influence: A Dialogue of Cultures in Peranakan Chinese Jewellery* on page 3. Image courtesy of Marjukka Lieppinen.

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PASSAGE

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PRESIDENT'S BLOG

Hello everyone!

Congratulations to Jo Wright on being conferred the Public Service Medal (Friend of Singapore) this year.



Jo Wright engaging with students during her museum tour. Image courtesy of Jo Wright.



The Public Service Medal (Friend of Singapore). Image courtesy of the Prime Minister's office, Singapore.

What a prestigious accessory to count among one's possessions!

We're very proud of Jo's exceptional dedication and contributions to the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) as a volunteer docent. Since joining FOM in April 2009, Jo demonstrated remarkable commitment by conducting nearly 900 tours and engaging more than 11,000 visitors. She served as FOM Coordinator for over three years, managing communications between museum staff and FOM members, whilst at the same time supporting tour scheduling and coordination. She also mentored several cohorts of FOM docents.



Sea of green at FOM's EGM. Image courtesy of Larissa Wiegele.

What is your prized possession? A piece of jewellery given to you with love? A rare book? A precious artwork? An antique? A piece of clothing? They are valuable, not because of their physical worth but because they are tangible links to memory, identity, and cherished connections to your family, past experiences, and loved ones.

This issue of *PASSAGE* contains articles about prized possessions that hold special connections to human history and cultural heritage. I hope you enjoy reading them.

The current year saw FOM making a momentous move, literally. After decades of being housed in



Sharing the vibe with the trainees on their first day of ACM Docent Training Programme 2025-2026. Image courtesy of Susana Ramos and Robert Collick.



A warm welcome to the trainees on the first day of TPM Docent Training Programme 2025-2026. Image courtesy of Kalyani Kausikan.

Stamford Court, we shut the office doors on 22 August 2025. We look forward to our new premises and are grateful to NHB for providing us with the new office space. We will announce our new office address soon.

A big thank-you to the 139 members who attended the Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) on 17 September 2025 and voted for the proposed amendments to the Constitution. These revisions will help sustain FOM operations. Our Annual General Meeting can be held in January rather than in December and provisions for electronic voting have been clarified.

The 2025-26 Docent Training Programme at the ACM and The Peranakan Museum (TPM) have started. We are excited for the 54 trainees who have chosen to participate in the rigorous training which promises to open new vistas of history, culture and heritage. My heartfelt thanks to the co-heads and members of the training teams who have generously given their time to ensure the trainees receive the best training. We wish the training teams and trainees an exciting and enjoyable learning journey.

I also warmly welcome the 398 new members who have joined FOM, bringing continued diversity to our community.

As the year draws to a close, I want to pay tribute to FOM Council members who are handing over the reins. My heartfelt thanks to Karen Ng and Linda Lim for their dedication and time as Vice-President and Treasurer respectively. They have been my pillars of strength throughout their stints. I salute Rupa Tamsitt for her unstinting dedication in ensuring that FOM's name and brand are recognisable and visible in the wide range of merchandise that she sourced. I am grateful that Tabitha Manresa and Andrea Baker have stepped up to other roles within Council ensuring continuity.

Lee Hong Leng
President
president@fom.sg

FROM THE EDITORS

And just like that it's time to reflect on the bygone year and reset for the new one. 2025 brought many highs for *PASSAGE*, notably, the expansion of our team to fill crucial roles and a memorable *PASSAGE* team bonding visit to the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC) where we were fortunate to tour some of the expansive storerooms and conservation laboratories. We left with the deepest appreciation of the conservationists who spend their days restoring precious artefacts and readying them for their moment in the (appropriately dimmed) spotlight. We send our warm thanks to Kathleen and the HCC team for their generous hospitality.

PASSAGE 2025 Issue IV arrives while we are still basking in the glow of Deepavali, the festival of lights, when oil lamps flicker against night skies and households dazzle with vibrant rangoli patterns and glinting bangles. Already Orchard Road has stretched toward Christmas, bringing us tinsel garlands, jolly baubles and shimmery stars. We can't help but be reminded of how ornamentation creates atmosphere, meaning and community – whether through hallowed symbolism or the sheer joy of abundance. It feels fitting that our theme for this issue is *Ornamental*. Across Asia, adornment has never been reserved for vanity alone; it has always been a language rendered visible. To ornament is to signify the remembrance of a loved one, to honour the divine, to display craftsmanship or to signal status and protection.

In this issue, we trace the journeys of ornaments across time and place. We linger in temples and sacred groves, where jewellery, crafted for gods or in memory of pre-deific worship, gleams with a radiance that transcends mere ornamentation, becoming an offering and a prayer. We traipse over carpets whose motifs, woven as much for storytelling as for beauty, carry us across deserts and seas to palace halls and newlywed homes. We step into the forbidden world of the Secret Societies to discover how the various ritual accoutrements speak a language of their own. And we look at weapons that were never only instruments of war: the jewelled scabbard, the carved hilt and the wavy blade, all made to convey honour as much as power.

As we leaf through these pages, we also reflect on the paradox of ornamentation. The accessory is often seen as secondary, an 'afterthought', yet it flavours the whole. A diamond-encrusted curlicue, an embroidered border, a carved flourish – such details hold the power to ascribe nuanced meaning and to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. As our cover image beautifully reminds us, ornamentation is never only about surface; it is about the stories that surfaces carry.

Closing out the year, we invite you to consider the ornamental, not just as decoration but as declaration. What we adorn, and how, tells of who we are, what we value and what we wish to remember. Thank you for journeying with us this year. May this issue bring you both beauty and insight as we step into a new season together.

Looking ahead, we invite you to contribute articles to Issue II of 2026, *Darkness and Light* (working title). The theme embraces duality: studies of the bittersweet across history, art and culture, exploring both the shadowed and the luminous. Opium offers an excellent example of contrasts – both medicinal and addictive, revered and reviled. Another rich vein of contrasts lies in ancient beauty practices. The 'golden lotus' was achieved through the physical deformation of the foot, while arsenic and lead preparations transformed women into 'ghostly' pale beauties.

The theme provides an opportunity to reflect and draw inspiration as you consider familiar subjects through a different lens and uncover new layers of meaning. Interested writers should submit a 100-word pitch for the issue, accompanied by two high-resolution images (at least 1 MB in size) by 10th January 2026. Trouble landing on a subject? Email us for guidance or brainstorming at passage@fom.sg.

Darly Furlong & Melissa Nesbitt
Managing Editors, PASSAGE



Some of the PASSAGE *team at the Heritage Conservation Centre.*

THREADS OF INFLUENCE: A DIALOGUE OF CULTURES IN PERANAKAN CHINESE JEWELLERY

MARJUKKA LIEPPINEN IS DREAMING OF OWNING PERANAKAN JEWELLERY FOR ITS BEAUTY AND THE STORIES IT WHISPERS

Photos, all taken by the author, are courtesy of the collection of the Peranakan Museum.

Just as children are always close to a mother's heart, so was a *nyonya's kerosang* pinned to her blouse, with a centrepiece, *Ibu*, symbolising the mother, accompanied by two smaller brooches, *Anak*, symbolising her children.



Kerosang Serong *from Penang, around 1900. A big* kerosang *was suitable for the* baju panjang *– tunics made of thick and heavy fabric. However, with the lightweight, lacier blouses, kebaya, brooches needed to become smaller and more delicate.*

For the Peranakan community, jewellery wasn't only an indicator of social standing and wealth. It was a significant cultural factor, particularly during weddings, but also during other ceremonies and events. It was an important repository of female affluence; an expensive dowry was a way of passing a share of family wealth to daughters. As an heirloom, it reminded people of their roots and kept memories of their ancestors alive.

Jewellery also had practical uses. The *kerosang*, typically a set of three brooches, which are probably the most iconic pieces of Peranakan jewellery, evolved from the need for an external fastener for upper garments worn by the ladies. The concept of pinning jewels onto clothing was relatively unknown outside Europe, but colonialism introduced this practice to the region.

PERANAKAN STYLE EMERGES

The years between 1830 and 1930 are often described as the Peranakan heyday. Many *babas* (Peranakan Chinese men) had the best education of the time. They ran prosperous businesses and held high positions in society. Success was put on full display with lavish jewellery, although



Chinese Children in New Year's Dress, *photographed by G. R. Lambert & Co. Singapore. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee. It was usual to give infants protective amulets as well as jewellery for first month and first year birthdays.*

Peranakans across all social strata and both genders were great consumers of accessories, and families collected jewellery as a store of wealth. By the mid-1800s, Singapore had become a jewellery hub, with local goldsmiths catering to the tastes of their clientele and thereby creating the unique Peranakan style we recognise today. Some families even had their trusted craftsmen visit their homes, where they could discreetly discuss design preferences and place their orders.

MULTICULTURAL MOTIFS

The term 'Peranakan jewellery' refers to the style rather than the makers, who were mainly Indians, Singhalese or Chinese. In addition to local artisans, freelance jewellers travelling from port to port brought the latest trends to the mix. What made Peranakan jewellery so special was the combination of designs and techniques from East and West. The jewellery reflected the multicultural ancestry and lifestyle of the Peranakans. There were Chinese symbolic motifs like dragons, phoenixes and the mythical creature, *qilin,* intertwined with elements like lacy floral decorations drawn from local influences. Crowns, stars and mythical fauna such as unicorns came from Europe. British royalty, through the romantic and ornamental Victorian style and later the opulence of the Edwardian era, became a popular source of inspiration along with the international Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements. The expectation of exquisite workmanship and finesse of the objects made these creations genuine pieces of art, not just jewellery.

PRACTICALITY AND LUXURY GO HAND IN HAND

Earlier, it was customary for *nyonyas* to have long hair. It was tied up in a tightly coiled bun called *sanggul* and held in place with luxurious hairpins. Melakan and Singaporean ladies favoured a set of three pins. Two of these pins were large and often featured round knobs. They were colloquially called 'coffin nails' because of their appearance. The alternative nickname, 'ear picks', wasn't any more appealing. The third hairpin, *bunga,* meaning flowers, was the most decorative. The Penang style, by contrast, was to use a set of five to seven



Gold and diamond brooch from 1920s portraying a bird surrounded by lacy floral ornamentation.



Peranakan ladies wearing baju panjang *with* kerosang *and Penang style hairdo.*



Belt buckles made of silver and gold. Various metalworking techniques as well as precious stones were used in these masterpieces.

pins of different lengths, making the hairdo resemble a tiara from afar. Hairpins were often given as dowry and were made of gold and diamonds or gilded silver.

Even if *nyonyas'* outfits often stole the attention, *babas* were also stylish dressers. One of their fancy accessories was the belt buckle, *pending*. Buckles came in many shapes, the ogival, eyelike shape being very popular. A traditional *baba's pending* was often made of silver and embellished with Chinese motifs and decorations.

MOURNING IN STYLE

The loss of a loved one in the family was reflected not only in the shift in the colour palette of clothing to more sombre colours, but sorrow and respect for the deceased were also shown in the jewellery. The main material for mourning jewellery was silver. Pearls, thought to symbolise tears, were also used. Mourning jewellery became popular among the Singaporean and Melakan Peranakans in the early 20th century, influenced by Victorian custom after Queen Victoria mourning the death of her beloved Prince Albert. Peranakan Chinese, many of whom were English-educated and loyal to the crown, were the only ones in the local community here to adopt this fashionable practice.

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

The affluent *nyonyas* of the1800s led sheltered lives with limited opportunities to show off their extravagant jewellery. Some of the occasions were public processions for weddings and events like the Wong Kong Festival in Melaka. There are contemporaneous stories of *nyonyas* in carriages wearing gold and diamonds, in one case estimated to be worth up to $1,000,000. The older ladies, *bibiks*, were especially competitive when comparing who had what. We can only speculate if the ladies' afternoon get-togethers with *sireh* and games might also have been a stage to display some new acquisitions. In the 1900s this became, luckily, easier with social clubs, dances and charity events.



Mourning jewellery made of silver, pearls and jade. The Peranakan mourning period traditionally lasted for three years. Each year was represented with a different colour so for the second year the stones could have been blue sapphires and for the third, green emeralds or jade.



This bridal headdress from Penang, made of gilded silver and kingfisher feathers is decorated with deities such as the Eight Immortals and the Three Star gods, Fu, Lu *and* Shou, *who are the symbols for happiness, prosperity and longevity. It was unusual that clothing other than bridal headdresses would feature deities.*

Today, many fine pieces of old Peranakan jewellery have unfortunately been lost. Some were sold prewar to raise money for the China Relief Fund; some vanished in the turmoil of the war and the Japanese occupation of Singapore. What was left had to be, in many cases, used to build a new existence. In the postwar life, there was no space for the bling of the past.

The interest in Peranakan culture is on the rise, including jewellery which has found new admirers outside the original community. One of them was the late Queen Elizabeth II, who was spotted on many occasions in her later years wearing an intricate diamond *kerosang* brooch, made by Singaporean Foundation Jewellers. The role of the royalty had changed from being an influence to being an influencer for Peranakan jewellery!

FOR FURTHER READING

The Bejewelled: Lives of the Peranakans by Norman Cho

MARJUKKA LIEPPINEN is an FOM docent and co-head of training for 2025-2026 at the Peranakan Museum.

SHHHHH! IT'S A SECRET

KATHERINE DAVIES EXPLORES AND CONTRASTS WESTERN AND CHINESE SECRET (AND SOME NOT SO SECRET) CRIMINAL SOCIETIES' METHODS OF IDENTIFYING MEMBERS

All images are courtesy of the William Stirling collection of the National Museum of Singapore, unless otherwise stated.

WESTERN GANGS

The West has a long history of criminal gangs. One of the most successful gangs in medieval times was a posse of Vikings who so terrified the king of France he gave them a whole duchy in order to save Paris. These men from the north, Norse men, named the duchy after themselves, and Normandy was born.

The descendants of these marauders further tried their luck and next looked to take over a whole country – England in 1066. William 'the Conqueror' divided England between sixty Norman families, who then proceed to jockey and outright fight for position, power and a greater share of the land for the next several hundred years. Things became so heated that in 1393 King Richard, the Second demanded that every pub in England display a sign clearly indicating its name and therefore its clientele's allegiance. This meant that members of each lord's retinue (gang) were less likely to inadvertently mix with and then kill each other. Pubs in England today still bear the names from this time: The Sun (Edward the Fourth), The White Hart (Richard the Second) and The Red and White Roses of Lancaster and York.



White Hart Inn signage, note the crown around the neck. Image taken by the author.

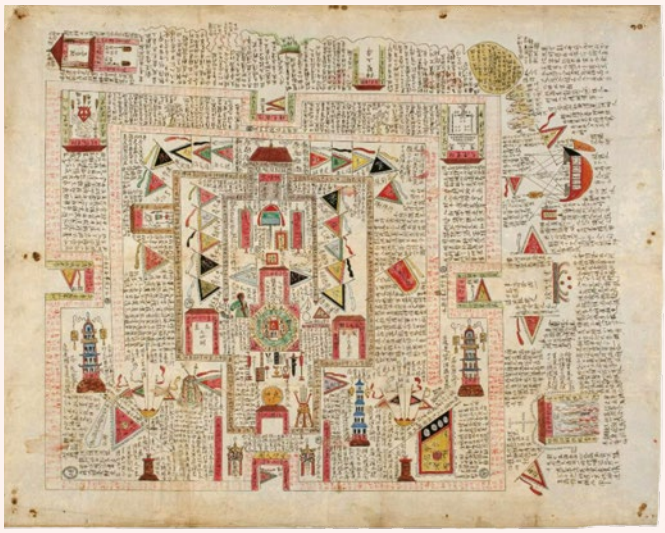
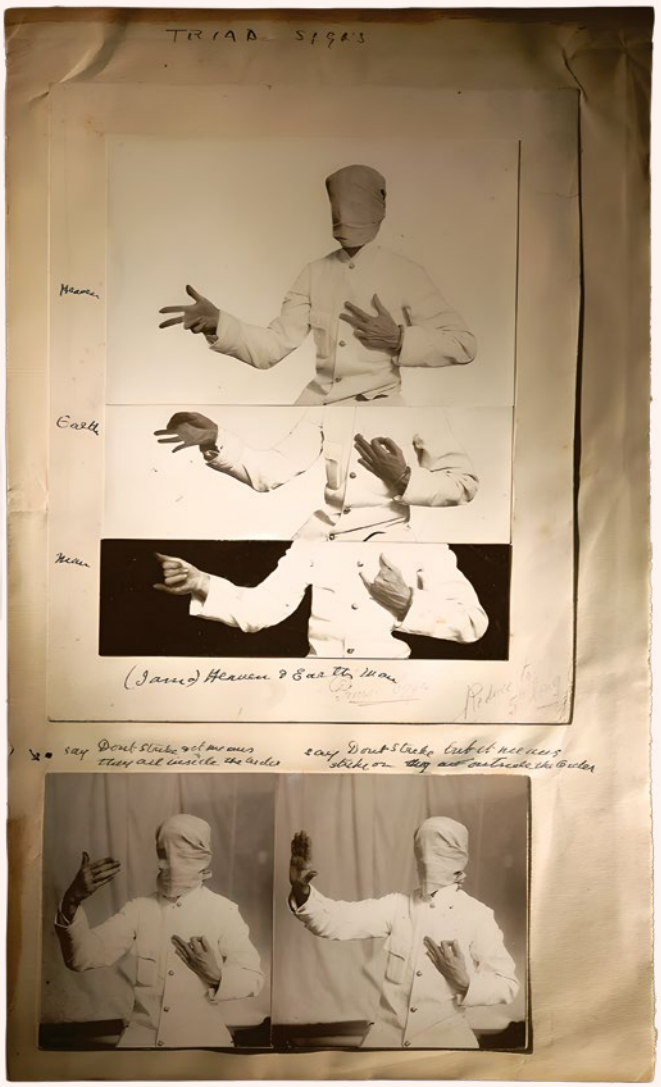


Illustration of the initiation ceremony grounds, also shows secret society chants. *Ink on paper, early 20th century.*

The West also has a long history of secret societies, both fictional and real life. The Masons have an extensive record of political influence (look at the back of an American one-dollar bill); whilst James Bond fought any number of secret societies bent on world domination. Members of such societies very helpfully tended to wear rings with membership symbols, allowing MI6 to more easily save the day.

THE STORY IN THE EAST

So how did members of the Chinese secret (and often criminal) societies in Singapore identify themselves? Hair styles (like the mods and the rockers of the 1960s); jewellery a la Spectra and Bond; or special symbols worn on clothing to indicate belonging? The answer is perhaps surprisingly none of these. There was no way to immediately identify who did or did not belong to any of the myriads of secret societies in Singapore. This was why, to the great embarrassment of the British colonial government, awards and titles were sometimes given to prominent Chinese business and community leaders who were then later found to be (or were at least strongly suspected of being) leaders of (or at least heavily involved in) these same secret societies.



Notes by William Stirling on secret society initiation ceremony, *early 20th century, Singapore.*

That is not to say that secret societies lacked tokens; there were a lot of various accoutrements symbolising a multiple of meanings, but everything was hidden. The only time bits and bobs were used was during the initiation ceremony. After that everything was, well, secret.

During the initiation ceremony, the new acolyte was thoroughly immersed in the power of the hidden meaning of various objects. Most of our knowledge of such ceremonies comes from William Stirling, Assistant Protector of Chinese (1921–1931) who wrote the seminal work on the subject, *The Hung Society*, or *The Society of Heaven and Earth*. The members themselves were slightly better at secret keeping and wrote no books.

MR STIRLING TELLS ALL

From Mr Stirling's work, the full mystery of the ceremony can be divined, firstly the initiation room itself, covered in hangings and flags. There were flags to represent the five legendary founders of the Hung Society, with colours indicating each lodge's location. A black flag with a green border represented the Green Lotus Hall, for example. There were also flags representing the seasons, the five tiger generals and the red flags of the commander-in-chief of the Tiandihui.

Some of the objects used were less grand. Straw sandals, for instance, were used as a nonverbal signal. How they were worn could indicate different societies and ranks, whilst their position outside a meeting place could indicate not only that a meeting was occurring, but also its purpose.

Mr Stirling also recorded the oaths taken by new members, which were suitably terrifying and explain the lack of first-hand tales of the societies. Breaking of the different oaths had different consequences, but all were usually fatal. If a member abused his society brother or his parents, he would be drowned; if a brother informed to the police, he would be struck by five thunder bolts; and if a brother betrayed any secrets, snakes would be used to bite out the offender's eyes.

Finally, the new devotee would have their finger pricked and their blood mixed with that of other members, chicken blood, rice wine and sugar. This mixture would be drunk before an altar and their oaths and loyalty were then sealed. At the conclusion of the ceremony, they would be given a parchment disguised as a simple receipt, that was actually proof of their membership. This paper, stamped with the society's seal upon it, was to be guarded with their life.



Flag of the Commander-in-Chief, Tiandihui initiation ceremony paraphernalia from William Stirling Collection. *Made of paper and bamboo, early 20th century.*

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

So how did members know each other? Mostly it was lack of alternatives. Arriving in Singapore far from home with no support from family or the government, many found it necessary to join a collective in order to survive. As membership was based on dialect, geography or clan name, it was easy to assume that other people who spoke your language and were also poor arrivals scrabbling for food and shelter were likewise somehow linked to a secret society. A few discrete hand gestures were all it took. James Bond would have been flummoxed.



Waxed umbrella used in the Tiandihui initiation ceremony, *made of wood and waxed paper, early 20th century.*



Sandals used in Tiandihui initiation ceremony, *made of straw, early 20th century.*



Ghee Hin Kongsi receipt seal, *wood, early 20th century.*

In more modern times, as membership became less about support and more about criminal activity, aligning with a decline in the ranks, a more obvious way to identify members became necessary. This was mainly accomplished by tattoos. Snake tattoos were quite common, with position and colour used to identify different gangs and rank.

The other animal associated with criminal gangs in Singapore was, surprisingly, a butterfly. Butterflies are not an immediate image when thinking of dangerous criminals, but in the 1950s the Red Butterfly Gang was notorious for its activities. This female-only crew mainly prayed on their own fellow bar hostesses and prostitutes, but also branched out as agents of justice, attacking women alleged to be the mistress of men married to unforgiving wives. The leader, respectfully called Madam Butterfly, was identified by her red butterfly tattoo, with other members having to settle for the less noticeable colours of black or blue.

This gang, along with all other criminal secret societies, was firmly ended in the police actions of *Operation Dagger* (1956), *Operation Pereksa* (1957) and *Operation Sapu* (1958). Backed by hundreds of Gurkhas, these police campaigns, often conducted at night, left the gangs with nowhere to hide.

AND NOW...

So, what is left behind? Only the items in Mr Stirling's collection (created through confiscated pieces seized after the 1890 Societies Ordinance banning the Secret Societies) give any clue to the hidden meaning and symbols of these organisations: no pub signs of heraldic symbols; no hair style waiting to be rediscovered; and no secret agent helping rings.

KATHERINE DAVIES was a Chinatown docent (Go Tanjong Pagar!) before returning home to the UK where she is still trying to adjust to the weather.

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WHISPERS OF THE *NAGA* – JEWELLED MYTHS AND MEMORY

GAYATRI SASI TAMPI REFLECTS ON THE *NAGAPADAM MALA* THROUGH KERALA'S LEGACY OF SNAKE WORSHIP

Long ago, when every household in Kerala kept a sacred grove for the serpent, the divine family cobra was no mere snake. It was small and radiant, the hood flaring wide, fangs gleaming and golden scales shimmering in the morning sun. At the approach of family, it did not strike but swayed like a dancer, meandering towards its shrine, never wandering away from its abode.

SACRED COVENANTS WITH THE SERPENT

According to legends, Nagaraja, the multiple-hooded king of the serpents, spat venom to desalinate the land and make it fertile after Parasurama, the warrior god, reclaimed Kerala from the sea. Nagaraja then became guardian of the soil and the symbol of fertility. Each household in the land honoured its own serpent-deity in a *sarpa kavu*, a sacred grove within its compound, often a circular patch of trees and medicinal plants with laterite images of serpents at its centre. Animals were not permitted to enter and trees could not be cut. Among Kerala's earliest forms of devotion, serpent worship held the central place. To this day, worship of the hooded snake permeates Kerala's life in temples as well as in Hindu households.



The sarpa kavu, *the lush grove where serpent images link ancestors and their progeny. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons.*

The family serpent is believed to be a small, delicate cobra. Angering this golden serpent is believed to bring disease, while propitiation makes it a primordial guardian ensuring prosperity, health and protection from untimely death.

Rituals of worship were held at least once in a year in honour of the *nagas* (serpent deities) and many continue to this day. Among them, the *sarpam thullal* (serpent dance) is one of the grandest propitiation ceremonies, performed to avert family misfortune. The rituals begin with cleansing a plot of land and drawing intricate, symmetrical figures called the *sarpa kalam* (serpent drawings). Their vibrant colours are made with rice flour, turmeric, burnt husk and other natural elements. Lamps, coconuts and offerings of rice are placed in front as priests chant sacred verses, followed by ballads praising serpent gods. Women observing penance sit within the *kalam*, drawn into a trance by the songs and instruments. They are then believed to be possessed by divine presence and soon begin a stylised dance, moving like serpents as they erase the sacred drawings with their untied hair and the areca-nut flowers held in their hands. The performance ends only when every trace of the *kalam* is wiped away. At the end, the main priest asks these female oracles if they are appeased and the rites continue until they indicate that they are. It is believed that the gods of the sacred groves will then bless the devotees.



The mesmerising sarpam thullal *dance honours the serpent guardians of the family. Image courtesy of the Kerala Tourism Board.*



Sarpa kalam, *exquisite floor art, to propitiate the family serpent deities. Image courtesy of Kerala Tourism Board.*

By the late 19th century, serpent groves and elaborate propitiation rituals declined but the *nagapadam* (snake hood) emerged as an enduring symbol of devotion to the deity. Nowhere is it more beautifully manifested than in jewellery.

JEWELS OF MEMORY

Ornaments offer insights into the beliefs of ancient cultures. The early people of Kerala fashioned body ornaments and charms from seeds, nuts and the claws, teeth and hair of animals. These probably had ritualistic meanings derived from the worship of nature. In later periods, the craftsmen of Kerala began to produce intricate gold ornaments decorated with flat diamonds, rubies and emeralds, and set in distinctive designs. Gold ornaments grew to reflect local motifs like the *manga* (mango), the *palakka* (the seed of the Pala tree) or the *pulinakham* (tiger claw ring) which was thought to dispel nightmares.

One distinctive motif of Kerala is of course the *nagapadam*, evoking the memory of serpent-worship. The motif gradually made its way into the necklace called the *nagapadam mala* which evolved from the simpler *nagapadam thali*, a household talisman that later took on marital symbolism. It has been suggested that the *thali* (marital pendant) worn by women from Kerala originally bore the symbol of Bhagavathi, their patron goddess, before evolving into the *nagapadam*, thus sustaining serpent veneration even as serpent groves dwindled. The grander *nagapadam mala* came to be worn at weddings, festivals and dances, growing into Kerala's iconic serpent imagery in ornament form.

HOODS OF PRESERVATION



The nagapadam mala, *a vessel of memory and resilience across generations. Photo taken by Paramount Photographers, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.*

The *nagapadam mala*, which literally means 'snake-hood necklace' exemplifies Kerala's history of serpent worship. This chain of cobra-hood pendants invokes the *naga* deities and even functions as a portable serpent shrine bestowing the wearer with all that it stands for – fertility, protection and prosperity. The cobra-hood necklace is sometimes described as a *deva-danam* (divine gift) embodying the blessing of the *naga* deities. The *mala* then binds the deity and the wearer.

Crafted with multiple hood motifs, sometimes numbering in the dozens, gem-set and radiant, it reflects the *naga's* manifold nature, vigilance and cosmic power. Green stones recall the serpent's connection to prosperity and perhaps fertility; the red gems on top suggest vitality, and the continuous chain of hoods makes the necklace resemble a living form of the serpent.



My legacy in red, recrafted from my grandmother's nagapadam mala. *Photo taken by Paramount Photographers, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.*

These *malas* are still crafted today, often on commission, although perhaps not as much as they used to be. Many families preserve them and they are often handed across generations and worn during auspicious or ritualistic occasions.

ECHOES OF THE SERPENT

By the 15th century, serpent groves had begun to shrink in size and occurrence, but it is in the last 200 years that these biodiverse ecosystems have reduced drastically. Yet, the traditions survive. Kerala's *nagapadam mala* and *thali* became part of its traditional jewellery, preserved today as heirlooms of beauty and ancestral memory. Across regions, common themes in serpent jewellery persist. The serpent remains a luminous, cosmic bridge between earth and heaven, memory and myth. Its jewelled hood glitters with ancient promises binding tradition to lore.



Strings of devotion, the pulluvan veena. *Image Courtesy of The Hindu.*

GAYATRI SASI TAMPI has a deep fascination for snake worship. She is enchanted by the *Pulluvan Pattu* - slow, evocative ballads that honour the snake gods - set to the haunting strains of the string instrument, the *Pulluvan Veena*. She guides at the Indian Heritage Centre.

JADE: BORN OF MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS

FELICIA SHAW DELVES INTO ANCIENT JADES AND THE GEOLOGICAL SECRETS BEHIND THEIR APPEAL

One gemstone sits at the heart of Chinese civilisation, venerated like no other. From Han dynasty burial suits to the trinkets in Kowloon's jade bazaar, jade (*yù* 玉) has been the ultimate adornment for millennia.

What is the secret of its allure? The 2000-year-old Book of Rites gives us some insight. Confucius states that it is not scarcity which sets jade apart from inferior stones, but its 11 intrinsic qualities:

Benevolence, in its warm, smooth texture;
Wisdom, in solidity;
Righteousness, in how its edges do not injure;
Decorum, in the graceful suspension of a pendant;
Melodiousness, in its resonance when struck;
Loyalty, in how its flaws need not be disguised;
Reliability, in its radiance from all angles;
Heaven, in its aura like a white halo;
Earth, manifesting from mountains and rivers;
Virtue, in its innate worthiness for ritual items;
Principle, as it is esteemed by all.

In sum, jade is like a true gentleman – and a gentleman must be like jade.



Jade Mountain Illustrating the Gathering of Scholars at the Lanting Pavilion, *Qing Dynasty Qianlong Era (work likely completed 1790). The sculpture weighs 290 kilogrammes and is nearly a metre wide. Photo courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art.*

CROUCHING STONE TIGER, HIDDEN ROCK DRAGON

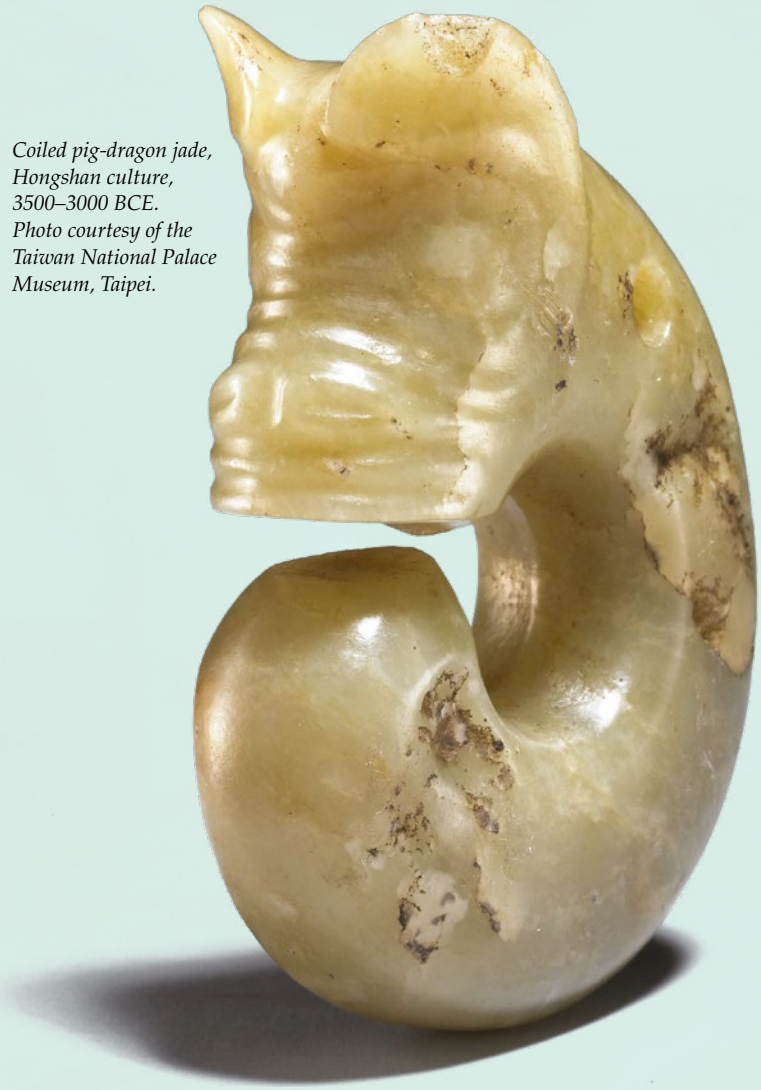
Given its long history, jade is a cultural rather than technical label. Jade originally described any stone of high enough quality for ritual use, thus was liberally applied to a host of materials including agate, quartz and turquoise. Nevertheless, stones from Hotan (also rendered Khotan/Hetian和田) in Xinjiang and Xiuyan (岫岩) in Liaoning Province, were two of the most highly-esteemed.

Top-tier Hotan jade, evocatively termed 'mutton-fat jade' *(yángzhībaíyù羊脂白玉)* for its moist, white lustre, is the mineral nephrite. During the Han dynasty, such jade was reserved for royal use: notable examples are the magnificent burial suit of the King of Chu, comprising over 4,000 pieces, and the seal of Empress Lü Zhi, featuring a mythical dragon-tiger *(chīhǔ螭虎)*.

Fascination with mutton-fat jade continued far beyond the Han; Qing Emperor Qianlong was an avid collector. *Jade Mountain Illustrating the Gathering of Scholars at the Lanting*



(Left) Empress Lü Zhi's seal, 2.8cm wide, Western Han Dynasty, reign of Gaozu (206 BCE – 4 CE). It is decorated with a mythical dragon-tiger known as a chihu. Photo courtesy of the Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an.



Coiled pig-dragon jade, Hongshan culture, 3500–3000 BCE. Photo courtesy of the Taiwan National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Pavilion, possibly commissioned for Emperor Qianlong's 80th birthday, is inscribed with his poetry, specifically stating the boulder's Hotan origin and remarking on its size.

Xiuyan jade encompasses a suite of minerals, chiefly nephrite and serpentine. Given the mine's relative proximity to early Chinese settlements, numerous ritual objects from Zhou and Shang dynasties were Xiuyan stones. Recent discoveries from the Neolithic Xiaonanshan site now indicate that East Asian jade-craft is well over 9,000 years old. Among Xiaonanshan's finds are jade discs, arcs and slit-rings *(jué 玦)*. The primitive C-shaped *jué* is thought to have gradually evolved into the 'pig-dragon' (*zhūlóng* 猪龙) of Hongshan Culture and eventually the sinuous Chinese dragon we know today.

But Xiuyan jade is not simply a relic of the past. In 2019, artists commemorated the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China by transforming a 118-tonne boulder into a replica of the Great Wall. It is one of the largest jade sculptures in existence.

VERDANT KINGFISHER JADE

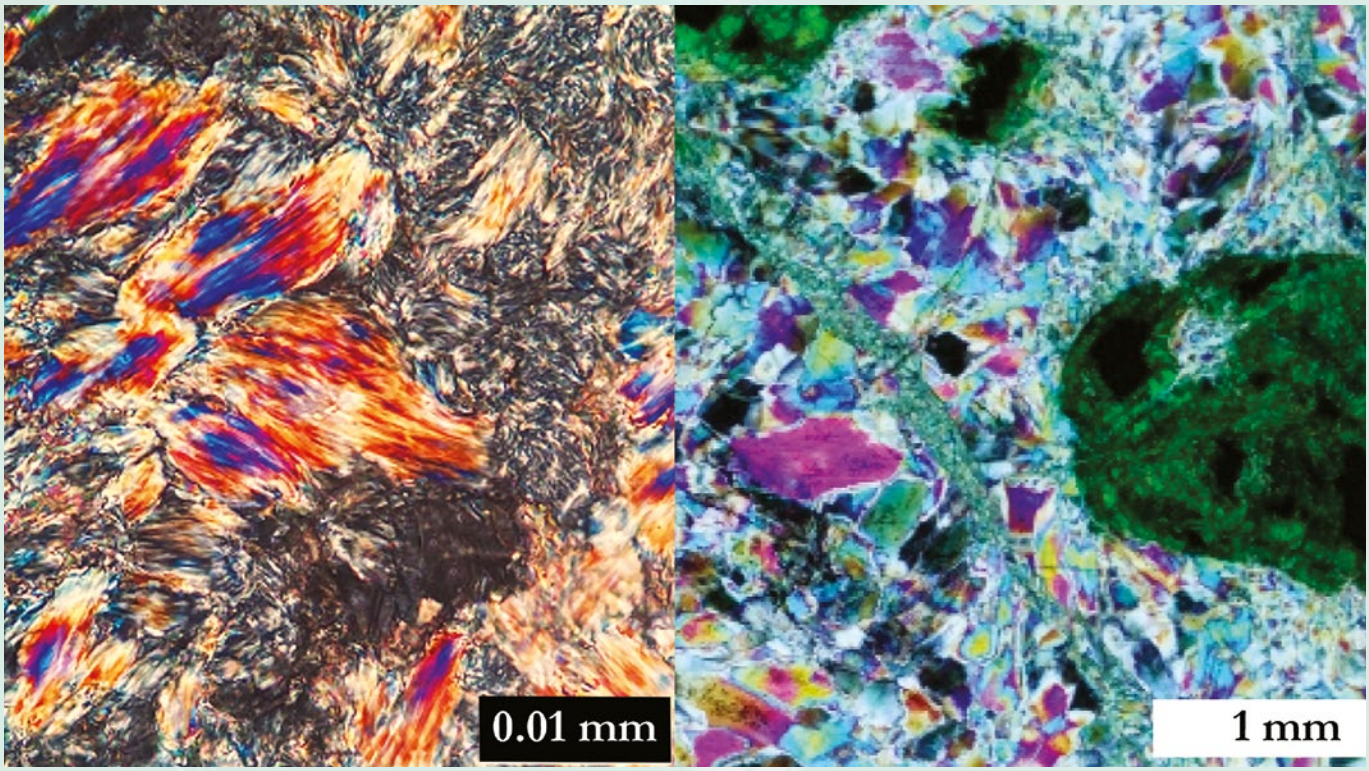
While nephrite dominated most of Chinese history, a new type of jade gained popularity in the Qing dynasty, remaining highly prized ever since: 'kingfisher jade' (*fěicuì* 翡翠), or jadeite. It is best known for an intense green variety, 'imperial jade', though it also occurs in white, red and lavender.



(Left) Pilgrim bottle, *Qing Dynasty, Qianlong Era (1735–1796). Functional pilgrim bottles would have been made of earthenware, metal or glass. Photo courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis.*

(Right) Jadeite Cabbage with Katydids. *The artisan has brought out the range of natural white, ochre and green in the stone. Qing dynasty (post 1770). Photo courtesy of the Tianjin Museum, Tianjin.*





Jade under the microscope. 'Mutton-fat' nephrite's calcium-rich fibrous texture (left) versus blockier, chromium-rich crystals in jadeite (right). Photo on the left courtesy of Jiang et al., 2023, A New Type of White Nephrite from Limestone Replacement along the Kunlun–Altyn Tagh Mountains. *Photo on the right courtesy of Zhang et al., 2025,* Manganese-Rich Chromite in Myanmar Jadeite Jade: A Critical Source of Chromium and Manganese and Its Role in Coloration.

Jadeite's introduction to China is bound in lore. One story goes that a 13th century trader wandering south from Yunnan picked up an ugly brown rock, intending to use it to balance his pack-mule. To his astonishment, the rock cracked open to expose a vibrant green centre. Another story involves Anawrahta, ruler of the Pagan, exchanging jadeite for Buddhist relics. Whatever the truth, jadeite provoked years of border wars between Qing China and the kingdom now known as Myanmar.

Supply only stabilised when a peace treaty was signed, and thereafter artistic expression soared to new heights. Artisans delighted the court by recreating humble objects in luxury, while still-life scenes ingeniously used the natural colour and texture of jade, a technique called *qiàosè* (俏色). A whimsical example is *Jadeite Cabbage with Katydids*.

GEOLOGICAL RECIPES FOR BEAUTY

Jade's tranquil beauty masks the earth-shattering circumstances of its creation, for it is the product of cataclysm.

Continental Asia has not always been a cohesive landmass. Once disparate blocks of crust, these split and recombined on an epic scale, driven by plate tectonics (the same forces that generate earthquakes and volcanoes). Magic happened during such collisions, for ocean crust contains some of the ingredients needed for jade, continental crust the rest. As rocks compressed like giant concertinas into mountains, it kickstarted a process deep below called metamorphism.

An astounding 1.8 billion years ago, a titanic crunch in what is now northeastern China marinated the rocks in mineral-rich brine, cooking them into Xiuyan nephrites, serpentines and a slew of other minerals. 300–500 million years ago in the northwest, molten granite and calcium-rich marble were squeezed together, baking their contact-points into white Hotan jade.

'Cooking' and 'baking' are used informally here, and if these terms sound strange, consider how a dish's texture and flavour changes with chemistry, heat, pressure and time. The same is true of metamorphic rocks. We can see this with the naked eye as well as under the microscope. 170-million-year-old Myanmar jadeite gets its translucent green from its blockier, chromium-rich pyroxene crystals, markedly different from fibrous amphibole crystals in waxy-looking nephrites.

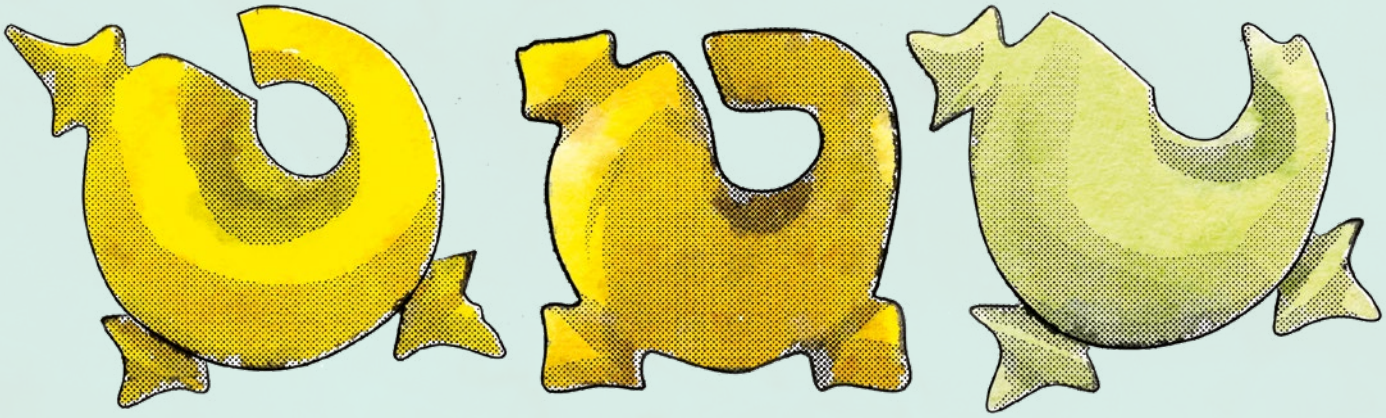
The process did not end with crystallisation. Millennia after, weathering and erosion unearthed the ores; water smoothed them into boulders and carried them downstream to enrapture the eyes of humankind. Truly, jade manifests from mountains and rivers, as Confucius described.

C.S.I. : JADE – THE CASE OF THE MISSING MINE

Geological fingerprinting has become increasingly important in determining the provenance of jade artefacts, overturning long-held assumptions.

Since the 1940s, Neolithic/early Iron Age 'lingling-o' ear ornaments had been found across sites in Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. Lingling-o's not only share similarities in design, many are fashioned from the same eye-catching, black-speckled nephrite. This nephrite was initially believed to be sourced locally. Yet for decades, the actual mine remained elusive.

It took over 50 years before researchers solved the mystery, using forensic tools as sophisticated as any of those in a crime scene investigation lab. The black specks



Sketches by author, of lingling-o ear ornaments crafted in Southeast Asia from Taiwan jade, indicating ancient trade routes. (left) Found in Go Ma Voi, Vietnam (in the collection of Institute of Archaeology, Hanoi). (middle) Found in Uyaw Cave, Philippines (in the collection of National Museum of the Philippines, Manila). (right) Sa Huynh Culture, Vietnam (in the collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Zoo-anthropomorphic jade earring, Beinan Culture, Neolithic Period (1500–300 BCE). The heads of the two figures are connected in the shape of an animal. The glassy green texture with black speckling is characteristic of Taiwan's Fengtien nephrite deposit. Photo courtesy of the Taiwan National Museum of Prehistory, Taitung City.

were rich in zinc and manganese, a tell-tale marker, and isotope analysis and electron probes identified the nephrite as native to Fengtien (豐田) in Taiwan's Central Mountain range. At a mere 2 million years old, this is possibly the youngest jade on Earth.

The Fengtien discovery revealed that in ancient times, Southeast Asia had an unprecedented supply chain for jade ornaments. Precursor stones that were shaped in Taiwan were then finished in workshops in the Philippines, Vietnam and other localities. Three-pointed earrings may thus be a collective design arising from trade interactions, distinct from Taiwan's native styles.

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

The love affair with jade persists into modern times. In 2014, a fabulous bead necklace, once owned by the Woolworth's heiress Barbara Hutton, was acquired by the Cartier Collection for US$27.4 million. Come awards season, ateliers churn out traditionally inspired and avant-garde jewellery for Hollywood A-listers gracing the red carpet.

Yet perhaps today's most important endorsement should not be celebrity, but sustainability. Illegal mining, child labour, work safety and toxic waste are all salient issues in the jade industry and can no longer be ignored.

Technology can help lead the charge in tackling problems. Satellite remote sensing can monitor mining operations and estimate the extent and severity of environmental impact. Blockchain – the same innovation behind cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin – can track individual gems from source to store, safeguarding both authenticity and responsible sourcing.

Such technologies have only newly lifted off in the diamond industry and have not become mainstream in jade. Still, as consumers, we can start by educating ourselves on the provenance of our purchases and gradually increase awareness among fellow aficionados. In doing so, 'virtuous' and 'green' jade may take on new meanings, enhancing this stone's timeless legacy.

This article is dedicated to communities in Myanmar's seismically active jade-producing region which are integral to mining and trading jadeite, many of which were devastated by the magnitude 7.9 earthquake on 28 March 2025.

FELICIA SHAW, DPhil, is an FOM docent guiding at the Asian Civilisations Museum. She is a geophysicist by training and works in resource stewardship.

KERIS, THE ULTIMATE ADORNMENT

DARLENE KASTEN DELVES INTO THE HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNIQUE SOUTHEAST ASIAN ACCESSORY, THE *KERIS*



Even today, the keris *is the ultimate adornment for a Malay groom. Photo courtesy of AIRISU.*

A brilliant display of earrings, amulets, brooches, necklaces and crowns dazzle the eye in the Mary and Philbert Chin Jewellery Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), the first and largest permanent gallery in the world to spotlight Southeast Asian adornments in a wide array of forms and styles. Unexpectedly, the gallery also includes a wall dedicated to *keris* weaponry, because along with being a weapon, the *keris* is the ultimate accessory for a well-dressed Malay man, one that like jewellery, indicates the wearer's pedigree and social status.

WHAT MAKES A *KERIS* A *KERIS*

The *keris* is an asymmetrical double-edged dagger unique to Southeast Asia that has been an important part of the material culture for centuries.

There are three essential parts of the *keris*. There is the *keris* blade and guard (*wilah*) made of forged layers of iron and nickel - sometimes from meteorite. The blade can be straight (*keris lurus)* or wavy (*keris luk*), where each wave in the blade is called a *luk* and the number of *luk* – always odd – corresponds to the owner's status and title, and to the spiritual power of the *keris*. A sheath or scabbard (*warangka*) holds and protects the blade. The top of the sheath (*sampir)* is usually boat-shaped



The 2024 wedding of Harith Hakim Hesheam to Lidia Syahindah Mohd Maliki, daughter of FOM docent, Sadiah Shahal and Dr Mohd Maliki Osman. Photo credit: AIRISU



Balinese keris *with an ivory sheath and demonic guardian hilt. Photo courtesy of the ACM.*

since the Malays were traditionally seafarers and fond of their boats. The materials used and workmanship usually denote the owner's status. The *keris* is held by a curved hilt or *hulu* designed to fit snugly into the hand. The hilt material and shape further provide insights into the *keris* owner's social status, beliefs, and could also reflect regional variations and personal preferences.

FROM WEAPON TO ACCESSORY

It is believed the *keris* was developed in East Java in the 9th century but reached its heyday during the Majapahit era, spanning from approximately 1293 to 1527, a period of significant influence and power for the Javanese kingdom in Southeast Asia. The peak of *keris* creation was the Sultan Agung period of the Mataram kingdom (1613–1645), its beauty enhanced by the finest materials.

During the Dutch occupation, new rules and regulations forbade the public display and use of weapons among the colonized subjects, resulting in the disarming of the local people and making the use of the *keris* largely ceremonial.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

Although *keris* types can be far-ranging in this fluid maritime world, certain shapes and materials are fairly specific to a region or culture. For example, the Balinese hold firmly to the traditions of Hinduism, so the hilt often fuses elements of Hindu gods and demons with Islamic features. Bali *keris* are generally larger than typical *keris*, with scabbards made of wood or ivory and often adorned with precious materials.

The design of the *Keris Bugis* has had a huge influence not only in South Sulawesi but also Peninsular Malaysia, Southern Sumatra, and the Riau-Lingga Islands due to the Bugis's far-reaching trade and travels. *Keris Bugis* hilts are known for their unique shape, often resembling a rounded pistol grip. Scabbards are often made from highly prized *jati gambol* (the burl of a teak tree.)

The *Java Keris* is easily recognizable from the shape of its sheath, especially the *sampir* with its rounded edges and the *warangka* which narrows, tapers a little, and is rounded at the point. The whole sheath up to the *sampir* is often cased in metal with an open panel to show the ornamental grain of the wood while the hilt shows greater simplicity.

The most recognizable hilt of a *Keris Pattani* is the *Huku Pekakak* made of wood, ivory or silver fashioned to look like a kingfisher (*Pekaka*) with an oversized head, long beak, and bulging eyes.

The Peninsular Malaysian *keris* normally sports a *Jawa Demam* hilt, a design that resembles a prostrate human with crossed arms. *Keris Sumatra* may also have a *Demam*



Classic Bugis-style keris *with projecting hilt sheathed in a scabbard made from a greatly prized wood that comes from the burl of a teak tree. Photo courtesy of the ACM.*



Keris Tajong, *a variation of the* Keris Pattani. *Both share the* Hulu Pekakak *(kingfisher hilt), however here the hilt appears more like a demonic figure with a long nose and bulgy eyes resembling a* wayang *(shadow puppet) character. Photo courtesy of the ACM.*



The gilding of the decorative metal sleeve (pendok) *on this* Sumatran keris *scabbard with its finely carved ivory* Jawa Demam *hilt and Islamic floral arabesque design mark it as the possession of a high-ranking member of the Palembang court. Photo courtesy of the ACM.*



Javanese keris *from Yogyakarta with* pendok *of gold and diamonds, clearly for someone of direct royal descent. Photo courtesy of the ACM.*

hilt, but the figure is more stylized and less recognizable as human, to adhere to a stricter Islamic aesthetic. The *sampir* may be curved in a Sumatran style, often with a steep, abstract form resembling a European vessel. On this island known for gold, the elite would have scabbards covered in yellow gold or in some cases, *suasa*, a reddish gold alloy mixed with copper.

The Moro-Malay Muslims in the Southern Philippines have evolved their own distinct version of the *keris*, the larger and more robust *sundang*. Some Moro cultures wear the *sundang* in wedding ceremonies, particularly during ceremonial dances.

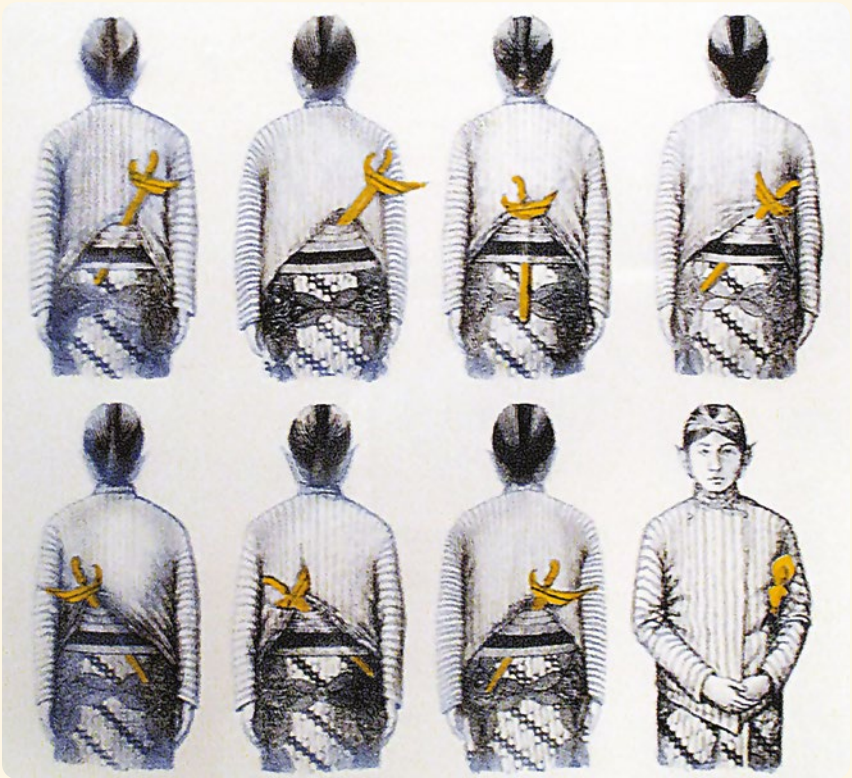
WEARING THE *KERIS*

The way a *keris* is worn can differ according to region, occasion and the owner's social status. In every region and particular ethnicity, there are distinct local rules and ethics. In Java for example, the way the *keris* is worn during a wedding ceremony is different from how it's worn during a burial. Generally, it is worn in the back slipped diagonally toward the right, but different situations can change the *keris* position.

Keris owners in parts of Sumatra, Riau, Malaysia, and the Bugis, wear their *keris* in the front, positioned diagonally to the right. In Bali, *keris* are usually worn in the back, slipped into the folds of clothing in a straight-up position or diagonally to the right. Again, special occasions may warrant a different style.

DECORATING THE *KERIS*

The origin of the Javanese tradition of putting jasmine garlands around the *keris* hilt, especially on the groom's *keris*



Various ways of wearing keris *in Java. National Museum of Indonesia, Jakarta. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*



Javanese keris *adorned with jasmine garland. Photo credit: Roy Anditya Kusworo.*

during the wedding ceremony, is not as romantic as it sounds. It's said to originate from the tale of Arya Penangsang, the mighty viceroy of Jipang in Central Java, who was killed by his own keris, *Setan Kober* ('devil of the grave').

The story recounts how during the making of the *keris*, the blacksmith (or *empu)* was disturbed by a crying demon from the graveyard, causing the *keris* to have a temperamental, evil nature that caused the wielder to be overly ambitious and impatient. During a battle, Arya Penangsang was wounded with a spear to his gut. Normally that would have been the end of him, yet he persevered despite an open wound. He merely encircled his hanging intestines on his *keris* hilt and continued to fight. But in attacking his opponent, the reckless, fierce and impatient Penangsang pulled his *Setan Kober* from its sheath, foolishly cut his own intestines, and finally died.

The Javanese groom coils a garland of jasmine around his wedding *keris* to recall Penangsang's bloody intestines. The jasmine symbolizes that the groom should not be reckless, quick-tempered, impatient or abusive towards his bride.

THE *KERIS* IN RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE

Keris can also be found in the ACM's Ancestors and Rituals Gallery. The location of their display provides context for the other significant accessorial roles of the *keris*.

Said to have been worn exclusively by warriors in the Malay courts of Kelantan and Pattani, the rare *Keris Tajong* in the *Adat* display was used in customary practices and rituals. *Adat*, in this context, encompasses a wide range of accepted



A ceremonial dancer performs with a keris *during the wedding of Harith & Lidia. Photo courtesy of AIRISU.*

customs, etiquette, and social norms that have evolved over time within the Malay community of which the *keris* often plays a role. For instance, at the ceremonial launch of Wisma Geylang Serai (WGS) in 2019, former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong presented a *keris* to the WGS Advisory Panel to symbolize the 'handing over of the place' (the *keris mandat* ceremony).

Elsewhere in the gallery, a *keris* from Bali with an ivory sheath and demonic guardian hilt is displayed along with theatre masks and *wayang* puppets. The context here is important as Balinese *keris* are used in the Barong and *Keris* dance, still performed in Bali, which tells a traditional story of good versus evil. *Keris* dances are among the many art forms closely associated with spirituality and are often performed in ritual ceremonies throughout the Malay world.

THE *KERIS* AS A LASTING SYMBOL

Over the past eleven centuries, the Malay culture has experienced untold challenges and changes, yet the *keris* has retained its iconic status as a lasting symbol of the unique, rich and vibrant Malay culture. Although not used for its original intent as a fighting weapon, the keris has remained amazingly relevant in Malay ceremony, ritual and performance.

DARLENE KASTEN was an FOM docent for 10 years, guiding at the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Malay Heritage Centre, STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery, and the Peranakan Museum. She now resides in the United States of America and Portugal.

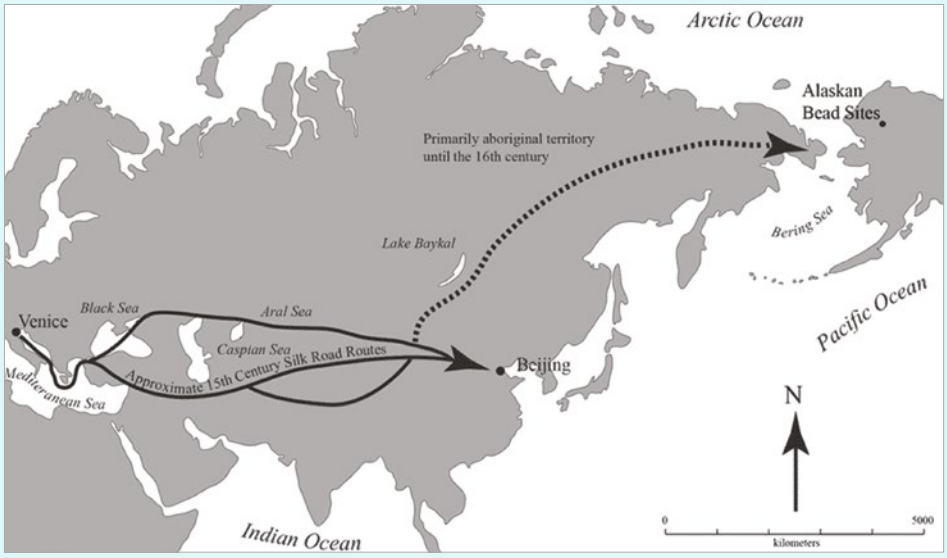
ON THE TRAILS OF BEADS AND STONES

VAIJU KHARÉ TRACES SOME TRAILS OF GLASS BEADS AND SEMI-PRECIOUS STONES AND HIGHLIGHTS THE CRAFTSMEN TRANFORMING THEM INTO MAGICAL MUST-HAVES IN NEPAL AND INDIA

All photographs are taken by the author unless otherwise stated.

The next time you pick up your beads or semi-precious stones to hold a rainbow shade at your neck, your wrist, your ears, your finger, pause a breath and know that you and your thought hold a legacy of thousands of years of adorning a self thus. Wherever and whenever it had begun it was a must-have of identity, status, custom, and as a language in itself, it spoke for you.

A bead historian, dubbed as the world's leading authority on beads, Francis Peter, Jr. says, "It's not about the beads, it's about people." How true.



A possible route of small glass beads from the city of Venice to prehistoric house sites in northern Alaska. Image courtesy of Kunz & Mills.

A CREATIVE EXPLOSION

The Late Paleolithic has been called the *big bang of human culture*, and a creative explosion in every aspect of human activity. New survival strategies, ways of organising societies, tools to work new materials led to production of not only utilitarian goods but also personal adornment. The rise of rituals and ceremonies brought in symbolic communication. As earliest evidence of abstract thinking, beads and semi-precious stones expressed artistic creativity and self-awareness. This distinguished us as humans. The beauty and symbolism attached to them came from the colours, texture, origin, the distances they travelled, and the workmanship that turned them into jewellery.

The first beads that were discovered date from more than 100,000 years ago and were made by piercing marine shells. Archaeological digs across the globe give us beads made from stone, wood, seed, mineral, coral, amber, bone, teeth, ivory, marine shells, and even ostrich egg shells. Although today we may attach little practical importance to our stones and beads, in ancient, traditional societies they reinforced order, ethnicity, wealth and power – political, religious spiritual – of this world and the next.

SOURCES AND ROUTES

Glass beads and stones are practically indestructible as a material and remain for thousands of years in most archaeological contexts. Even tiny fragments tell the stories of the many societies and the web of land and sea routes. The varieties of shape, size, colour, the composition and production technologies make them markers of exchange pathways and chronological milestones covering the Indian Ocean, Africa, Asia, Middle East, the Mediterranean world, Europe and America. We now know that the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea were linked as early as the fourth century BCE, so the Mediterranean and South Indian glass beads from the first century CE made their way to Southeast Asia and to Korea.

Cat Jarman, an archaeologist, takes us on a journey in her book *River Kings: A New History of the Vikings from Scandinavia to the Silk Roads* following the trail of a single carnelian bead discovered in a Viking mass burial site in Repton, England to its origins, thousands of miles away through land and waters, in western India.

CRAFTSMEN AND MARKETS

Not everything was crafted at the source – so along the routes from source to market went the craftsmen and artisans too! There is evidence that North Indian glassworkers were at Khao Sam Kaeo in Thailand and probably Egyptian glassworkers in Sri Lanka.

There was no single technology, person or design, but a rolling kaleidoscope of artisans and craftsmen who turned beads of glass and semi-precious stones into a range of adornments: the tiniest pierce-stud to whole body-wear for rites that marked birth, death and beyond, from cradle to grave. There was no single road but a continuous chain of markets that traded from east to west.

I have often walked the beads bazaar of Kathmandu and some Tibetan markets to see the craftsmen at work. Mostly, the former are migrants, the latter refugees, both belonging to the minority of the mainstream society, and have been trading, making, selling these adornments for more than three generations. Their minor, marginal status does not stop their expertise from becoming a necessity of identity to the higher classes of the society.



Beads bazaar, Kathmandu.



Crafting poté, Kathmandu.

The *poté* (beads in Nepali) come from as far as Cyprus, Czech Republic, Indonesia, Brazil and Uzbekistan and it is only the Nepali Muslim beads craftsmen who can thread out the very traditional designs and ornaments worn by nearly all the non-Muslim castes of Nepal. The Tibetan refugees claim that the semi-precious stones come from Tibet-China, Afghanistan, some parts of India, Sri Lanka, and now the artificial synthetic ones from China. The very characteristic designs these refugees and Indian craftsmen of northern India make are found only at the Tibetan refugee markets. It is this craft and trade that got a place for these minorities in the lands they have now made 'home'. These 'bits of light' are significant for their minimal yet politically charged existence.



Typical bead designs made by Tibetan refugees.

MARKERS OF MEANING?

Glass became precious, stones became transcendent, and the abstract became tangible. Crossing borders and imagination these bits of light bespeak love, art, culture, religion, spiritualism. Hermann Hesse says it best in his novel, *Glass Bead Game* where he explores an individual's search for authenticity, self-knowledge and spirituality.

"No permanence is ours; we are a wave that flows to fit whatever form it finds: Through night or day, cathedral or the cave we pass forever, craving form that binds**".**

Are the beads and stones we don a statement of our 'craving form that binds'? I wonder.

VAIJU KHARÉ is an FOM member and an independent researcher in international relations, traditions of art, architecture, folk, and comparative religions of Asia.



Semi-precious stones, Tibetan market, Ladakh.

CROWNED IN GOLD: WEDDING HEADDRESSES OF INDONESIA

SHIRLEY ONG SHOWCASES HOW THREE WEDDING CROWNS REVEAL DIVERSE PATHS OF CULTURAL SYNTHESIS ACROSS THE INDONESIAN ARCHIPELAGO

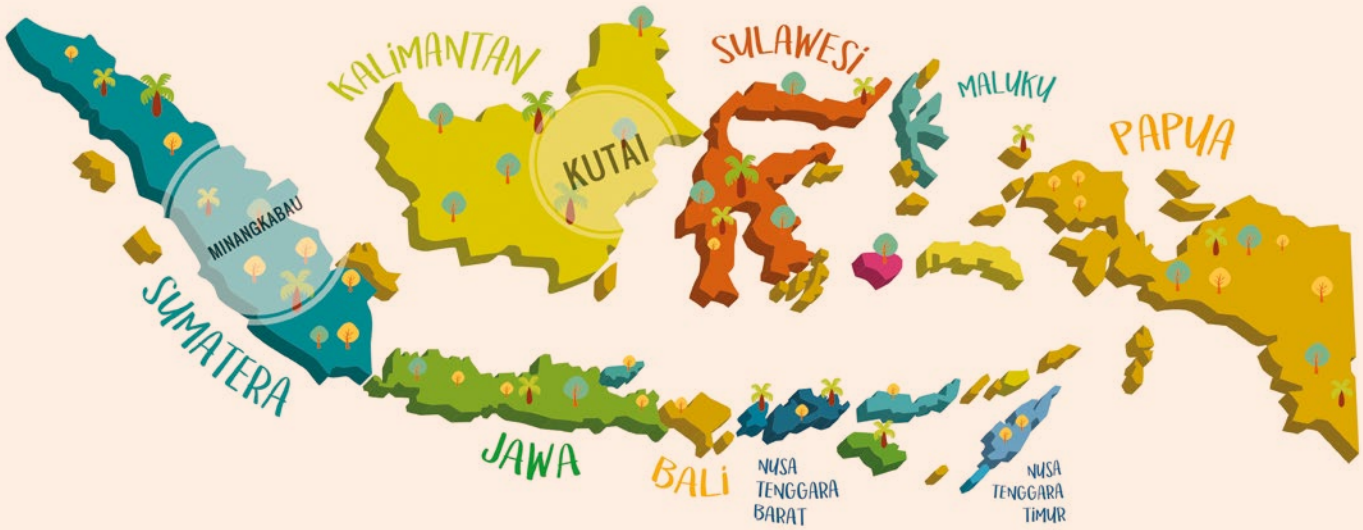


Figure 1: Map of Indonesia. Image courtesy of Shutterstock.

REGIONAL GOLD CROWNS OF INDONESIA

From West Sumatra's highlands to Bali's temple courtyards and East Kalimantan's royal palaces (Figure 1), Indonesia's regional gold crowns tell a story of sacred landscapes, legendary creatures and divine power. These magnificent headdresses share three characteristics: lavish gold, ceremonial grandeur and layered assimilation of indigenous beliefs steeped in either or both Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic traditions.

THE ALLURE OF GOLD

Gold, long associated with the sun, has embodied wealth, lineage and power across the Indonesian archipelago. Hindu-Buddhist temple offerings and Islamic ceremonial gold objects carry deep spiritual resonance. Secular gold ornaments with sacred motifs reflect a desire for divine connection and protection.

Wedding headdresses once fashioned from gold and precious stones, reserved for royalty, reflect the archipelago's ancient renown as *Svarnabhumi*, the 'Islands of Gold'. Today, whether treasured heirlooms or contemporary pieces, they continue to embody the cultural values they have carried for centuries.

BALINESE *GELUNGAN PAYAS AGUNG*

The *gelungan payas agung* (grand mountain crown) (Figure 2), a golden crown that varies subtly across Bali's regions, towers from the bride's head, its mountain-like structure reflecting Mount Agung, Bali's highest and most revered volcano. Even before Hinduism reached Bali's shores in the 14th century, Mount Agung was worshipped as the dwelling place of the *Naga* (serpent/dragon) deity. This volcano veneration was later woven into Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, with the mountain embodying Mount Meru, the centre of the Hindu-Buddhist universe. Bali's predominantly Hindu-Buddhist identity traces back to Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit period (around the 14th century) sustained through centuries of resistance to Islamic influence.

In the Balinese Hindu universe, three worlds exist: gods above, humans in the middle and demons below them. This hierarchy influences ceremonial dress. The most valuable materials adorn the upper body, in particular the head, believed to be the seat of the soul. The *gelungan* thus



Figure 2: Gelungan Payas Agung & Udeng. *Image courtesy of Shutterstock.*

represents centuries of spiritual evolution, from ancient volcano worship to Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, making it the centrepiece of Balinese wedding attire.

Balinese crowns of up to 40 centimetres in height and four kilograms in weight were once made of gold, only for royalty, reflecting high status and the wealth of the kingdom. These complex ensembles included golden floral elements imitating Mt Agung's flora, symbolising abundance and fertility. The central *petitis*, a jewelled gold band, symbolised calm thinking. The height reflected lineage and social standing. Today, the *gelungan*, replicated in inexpensive materials such as brass, is still widely used in traditional weddings.

For the groom, the *udeng* (Figure 2), a simple peaked headcloth, is an essential ritual attire that transcends lineage and class. Its central knot symbolises mental focus while its peak signifies devotion to the divine, sometimes interpreted as representing the Hindu God Lord Shiva. Many grooms choose the *udeng* over a crown.



Figure 4: Rumah Gadang *(Traditional House). Image courtesy of Shutterstock.*



Figure 3: Suntiang Gadang. *Photo taken by Jeff Kwan.*

MINANGKABAU *SUNTIANG GADANG*

In the highlands of West Sumatra, the Minangkabau, arguably one of the world's largest matrilineal societies, crown their brides with the *suntiang gadang* headdress during wedding ceremonies. A resplendent example is displayed in the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) (Figure 3).

The *suntiang* appears in many regional styles and remains a shared cultural emblem of the Minangkabaus. *Suntiangs* of wealthier clans may be crafted from gold and precious stones, thus becoming treasured heirlooms passed from mother to daughter through the matrilineal inheritance system, connecting extended families across generations.

Unlike the *gelungan*, *suntiangs* are not symbols of royalty, but are worn by brides from all social backgrounds, whether borrowed from relatives or made from simpler, less costly materials.

Weighing up to five kilograms, the *suntiang* sits heavily on the bride's head, symbolising the weight of her new responsibilities as matriarch and lineage bearer. Flowing fern tendrils, chiselled into the headdress, represent kinship ties connecting the extended clan.

Horn-like shapes echo traditional *rumah gadang* rooflines (Figure 4) and recall the origin myth, where a tiny calf, its horns sharpened, defeated a foreign prince's war buffalo, giving the people their name, *minang* (victorious) and *kabau* (buffalo). The *suntiang* also features triangular bamboo shoots representing growth, and tiered floral elements symbolising fertility.

Grooms may don a version of the *suntiang* but only in Nagari Indrapura. Elsewhere, they typically wear a *deta* (Figure 5), a traditional headcloth of luxurious *songket* fabric woven with gold or silver threads, sometimes folded to echo the buffalo horn motif.

With its nature-inspired motifs, the *suntiang* reflects Minangkabau's heritage as highland rice farmers and coastal traders. Centuries of trade brought prosperity and Islamic influences that adapted Minangkabau's nature motifs into aniconic forms, harmonising with existing matrilineal *adat* (custom). Today, the *suntiang*, with its Chinese-influenced metalwork and Islamic geometric patterns, graces wedding celebrations, a testament to centuries of cultural synthesis. Instead of Hindu-Buddhist influences seen in the other wedding crowns, the *suntiang's* Islamic elements are more compatible with Minangkabau matrilineal society.

KUTAI *GARUDA* CROWN

On the third floor of the ACM is an elegant 1920s gold crown from East Kalimantan (Figure 6). Perched atop it is a stylized bird, possibly the half-human, half-avian *garuda*, a symbol of Kutai royal authority. Though a common emblem across much of Indonesia, for the Kutai people the *garuda* holds deep significance, perhaps rooted in an older belief system that revered large birds, especially eagles, which are powerful omen-bearers as they often fly in pairs and circle high above the jungle canopy. In Hindu mythology, the *garuda* is the eagle-like mount of Lord Vishnu.

Older symbols were not rejected with the arrival of Islam in the 15th century, but preserved and reinterpreted. As Islam discourages figurative depictions of gods and mythical beings, traditional figures like *garuda* and *naga* (serpent being) were stylised into floral or abstract forms. In the ACM crown, *garuda* appears with outstretched wings but without a human torso.



Figure 6: Garuda *Crown. Photo taken by Jeff Kwan.*



Figure 5: 19th century gold deta, *embossed to simulate cloth folds. Image courtesy of A. Richter.*

The ACM crown, believed to have been worn by Kutai aristocracy, is flanked by *nagas*, possibly set against a stylised Mount Meru, adorned with floral motifs symbolising fertility, prosperity, and abundance. *Nagas* are water guardians and symbols of fertility but in Islam they are not viewed positively. After the arrival of Islam, the Kutai recontextualised them as cultural symbols, allowing the assimilation of Hindu-Buddhist traditions.

Although *garuda* and *naga* are mythological adversaries in Hindu tradition, both are protective in Kutai tradition, reflected in their pairing on royal regalia such as the *ketopong*, the royal crown of the Sultan of Kutai, crafted in Hindu-Buddhist style in the mid-19th century. Its design linked the Islamic sultans of Kartanegara Sultanate (around 17th century), to the older Hindu-Javanese royalty, allowing them to claim prestige as heirs to the Indianised kingdoms of ancient Kutai.

This *garuda* crown embodies the synthesis of Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and indigenous traditions. Unlike the *gelungan* and *suntiang*, little is written about the *garuda* crown in today's wedding ceremonies, perhaps because the ethnic Kutai people now form a small proportion of its diverse multi-cultural population.

THE SPIRIT OF INDONESIA

These lavish golden headdresses capture the spirit of Indonesians' adaptability and tolerance. Each represents a unique cultural synthesis: Hindu-Buddhist traditions in Bali, Islamic adaptations in Minangkabau, and layered religious influences in Kutai. While only the *gelungan* and *suntiang* continue to grace modern weddings, all three remain powerful symbols of Indonesia's diverse cultural heritage.

FOR FURTHER READING

Richter, A. (2000). *Jewelry of Southeast Asia*. Thames & Hudson Ltd, London.

SHIRLEY ONG is an ACM docent whose interest in Indonesian wedding crowns is inspired by the nation's motto 'Unity in Diversity'.

NATURE'S TOUCH: FROM GRASS TO GOLD

JOIN **SHIRLEY WONG** IN HER JOURNEY TO DISCOVER HOW RITUAL, IDENTITY AND ART BLOOM IN GARDENS WORN ON THE HEAD

All photos taken by the author.

Across cultures, no life ritual feels complete without a crown. From laurel wreaths in ancient Rome to bridal veils threaded with orange blossoms in Victorian Europe, from midsummer flower garlands in Scandinavia to rosemary and myrtle woven into medieval nuptial rites, humans have long crowned their heads with botanicals – signalling transformation. Abundant landscapes provide endless raw material, and spiritual traditions imbue vegetation with meanings. To place something on the head is to proclaim change: from child to adult, single to married, mortal to divine.

Yet nowhere is this dialogue with plants more richly expressed than in Asia, where garlands of grass, stalks of rice, blooms of flowers have adorned the heads for centuries. Across Southeast and East Asia, headdresses are gardens on the head: sometimes ephemeral, sometimes eternal, but always carrying nature's touch across life's most important thresholds.

GRASS AND BEGINNINGS

At the Asian Civilisations Museum, a simple headdress woven from fresh grass by the Orang Asli, the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, may be seen as one of the most original forms of adornment. Made from nothing more than blades gathered from the forest, it crowned the head during rites of passage and ritual performances.

Such headdresses are worn by the Orang Asli, whose diverse traditions reflect deep ties to the natural world. To them, plants carry spirit power, and the crown of grass is not mere decoration but a conduit of protection and transformation. Fragile and fleeting, it embodies impermanence and animist belief in the spirit power of vegetation.



Grass Headdress displayed at Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.



Solok Gold Crown displayed at Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

The grass headdress is worn during important rites of passage and ritual performances, including ceremonies marking transitions in life such as coming-of-age, healing rituals or communal celebrations, where the act of weaving and wearing the crown reaffirms ties to the natural and spiritual worlds. Because the headdress wilts so quickly, it must be remade fresh each time, ensuring that the ritual itself is always renewed and never static.

THE HARVEST MADE PERMANENT

Where grass speaks of transience, the Solok Gold Crown of the Minangkabau transforms the vitality of rice, ferns and blossoms into permanence. Unique to the village of Solok, West Sumatra, Indonesia, and worn by brides in weddings and ceremonies, the crown is a garden rendered in metal: gold-foiled flowers rising in profusion, fern tendrils entwined across its surface and bamboo shoots pointing upward like new growth.

For the Minangkabau, the world's largest matrilineal society, rice is more than sustenance: it is wealth, fertility and continuity passed down through women. Worn during weddings and major ceremonies, the Solok Gold Crown is heavy enough to require attendants to steady it, thus reminding the bride that abundance brings responsibility. The headdress symbolises prosperity carried with humility and care. If the *Orang Asli* grass crown is fleeting, renewed with every ritual, the Solok Gold Crown displays the harvest in metal, proclaiming abundance to be borne across generations.

BOUQUETS OF BLESSINGS

At the Peranakan Museum, bridal crowns shimmer with gilt silver and kingfisher feathers, their surfaces alive with phoenixes clutching flowers and butterflies hovering over blooms. On the wedding day, the Mistress of Ceremonies plaits and coils the bride's hair, securing it with an array of floral, insect and bird hairpins. Each carries auspicious meaning: chrysanthemums for fidelity, blossoms for fertility, phoenixes for harmony. Larger rosetted hairpins and an S-shaped pin are placed above the ear, crowning the bride with a living bouquet made of metal.



Bridal headdress with 174 hairpins displayed at the Peranakan Museum, Singapore.

Here, botany becomes inheritance. The floral metaphors are not fleeting embellishments but enduring blessings, passed from one generation to the next. Each bride steps into an heirloom garden, where silver flowers and feathered wings carry the memory of countless weddings before. To wear such a crown is to carry both personal promise and ancestral blessing, a bouquet that binds past and future in one resplendent inheritance.



Nias Priestess Ensemble displayed at Asian Civilisations Musuem, Singapore.

GROVES OF SPIRIT

While bridal crowns celebrate family, priestly crowns speak to the cosmos. Among the Nias of Indonesia, priestesses wear towering ensembles decorated with feathers, vegetal patterns and wood. Some motifs echo leaves, others evoke branches, so that the headdress resembles a sacred grove.

When the priestess moves, her crown shimmers and rustles like trees in the wind. Unlike bouquets that affirm kinship, this leafy ensemble embodies cosmic balance. It is a portable temple, marking her as mediator between earth and sky. In its presence, one could imagine the forest itself speaking – a reminder that nature is both a stage and a participant in ritual life.

THE THEATRE OF DIVINITY

From the Burmese court of Mandalay comes a lacquered and gilded headdress, its nine leafy tiers rising skyward to a curling finial. Inlaid with glass and brilliants, it glitters like a celestial crown. Though echoing the regalia of kings and Jambhupati Buddhas, this crown is made for the stage, worn by actors in court *pwe* dramas, a classical Burmese dance-drama, that retells Buddhist Jatakas and royal histories. At its base, stylised flower heads form a garden of ornament, grounding celestial imagery in the language of bloom.

Here, botany enters theatre. The leafy tiers evoke both temple roofs and the sacred Bodhi tree, transforming vegetal motifs into symbols of ascent and enlightenment. Like the blossoms of earlier crowns, these forms translate nature into human adornment, yet in the Burma of the past, they carried the drama of performance, blurring the line between king, deity and actor. Nature's touch is not only in ritual or inheritance, but in the spectacle – a bloom of divinity unfurling on stage.



Headdress from Burma displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

CROWNS OF DAILY LIFE

Not every crown aspired to permanence. In the Philippines, the *salakot* began as practical headgear woven from bamboo, rattan or palm leaves. Farmers wore them to shield themselves from the tropical sun, but even this humble hat crowned the head with botany.

Under Spanish rule, the *salakot* took on new meanings. Wealthier versions were adorned with silver, tortoiseshell or even gems, transforming everyday plant fibres into symbols of pride and status. The *salakot* proclaimed resilience; it was a crown of endurance, rooted not in imperial grandeur but in the daily strength of people who worked the land.



Salakot *displayed at Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.*

Placed beside imperial diadems and ritual headdresses, the *salakot* shows how Asia's crowns span the full spectrum of human experience: from fleeting grass to gilded harvests, from cosmic groves to eternal blossoms, from lotus crowns to palm leaves under the sun. Together, they remind us that across this region, nature has always adorned both ceremony and everyday life.

CONCLUSION

While other cultures crown themselves with laurel, myrtle or orange blossoms, it is in Asia that this dialogue with plants finds its most dazzling and meaningful forms. Here, crowns become harvest fields, gardens of silver and feather, sacred groves, cosmic lotuses and eternal blossoms.

All crowns may be botanical at heart, but in Asia they bloom into some of the world's richest expressions. To see them today in Singapore's museums is to witness not just the ornaments, but a centuries-long dialogue between people and plants: weaving grass into gold, and nature into identity.

FOR FURTHER READING

Southeast Asia: A History in Objects by Alexander Green.

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WOVEN NARRATIVES: CARPETS AS STORYTELLERS

ADITI MANN REVEALS THE RICH STORIES OF IDENTITY, CULTURE AND TRADITION HIDDEN IN EVERY CARPET

Carpets are ubiquitous objects, so deeply embedded in our everyday lives that they are often overlooked. At their most basic level, they are floor coverings, woven from natural fibres like wool, silk, cotton and linen, or synthetic fibres like nylon and polyester. They can warm cold floors, soften hard surfaces or lend elegance and beauty to a space. Yet to reduce carpets merely to their functional or decorative roles is to miss their deeper cultural significance. Across centuries and continents, carpets have acted as visual representations of personal experiences, family heritage, religious beliefs and cultural values. Their colours, patterns and motifs symbolise the values, beliefs and identities of the communities that made them. They are not just works of art but also historical records, narrative objects and cultural storytellers.



Image 1: The Pazyryk Carpet. Image courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.



Image 2: Deer Detail on Pazyryk Carpet. Image courtesy of www.drmetablog.com.



Image 3: Horsemen detail on Pazyryk Carpet. Image courtesy of www.drmetablog.com.



Image 4: Turkmen Dowry Rug. Image courtesy of Brian Macdonald Antique Rugs.

This article traces the storytelling capacity of carpets across different cultural contexts. From the ancient Pazyryk carpet of Central Asia to Persian Garden carpets, Turkmen dowry rugs, Ottoman prayer carpets and Japanese adaptations of Persian textiles, carpets emerge as living documents of human experience. Through them, we get a glimpse of histories of migration, ritual, identity, faith and global exchange.

A CHRONICLE OF HISTORY

The tradition of hand-woven carpets dates back about 2,500 years. Carpet making techniques were probably first developed by the nomadic tribes of Central Asia. Carpets served not only as protection against the harsh, cold climate of the steppe but also as expressions of identity.

The Pazyryk Carpet (Image 1), discovered in 1949 in a Scythian burial mound in the Altai mountains in Kazakhstan, is the earliest known pile carpet dating to the 5th–4th century BCE. Today, preserved in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, it exemplifies the technical mastery and symbolic sophistication of its makers.

Measuring roughly six by six feet, the carpet is made of wool and is covered with geometric and figural motifs. The central field features rows of cruciform patterns with solar associations along with the Indic lotus bud motif – an early testimony to the cultural exchanges across Eurasia.

One border features griffins (mythological creatures with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion), which are ancient symbols of royalty, power and authority. Another has a row of deer (Image 2) that represent protection in the afterlife, while a third features a row of horsemen (Image 3), which is an indication of wealth and prestige. In short, the motifs on the carpet offer an insight into the life of the deceased person – his place in society, his values and beliefs, and the customs and traditions of the community. As such, the Pazyryk carpet is not only an archaeological treasure but a woven chronicle of an ancient civilisation.

SYMBOLS OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

For many communities carpet weaving is intimately connected to the daily life of the people. Carpets often mark personal milestones like weddings and childbirth. Among the Turkmen, dowry rugs serve this role. Traditionally woven by young brides-to-be, these rugs were not commodities for sale, but treasured heirlooms presented during marriage ceremonies. Often the young couple would stand on the rug, during the wedding ceremony, that would later be presented to the bridegroom along with the rest of the dowry.

One striking example is the Turkmen dowry rug (Image 4) which is decorated with columns of octagonal *gül* motifs that are stylised flower motifs unique to a particular community or tribe. The *gül* is not only decorative but emblematic as well – it symbolises tribal identity, heritage and continuity. The Tekke *gül* for instance (Image 5) identifies the Tekke community, which is the largest of the Turkmen tribes that reside mainly in Turkmenistan.

The importance of the *gül* motif is further magnified by the fact that the national flag of Turkmenistan (Image 6), which is the visual identity of the nation, features the tribal crests (*gül*) of the five largest tribes in Turkmenistan – namely the Salor, Tekke, Saryk, Yomut and the Chaudor.

That a carpet motif has become a national emblem highlights the deep connection between the woven design and the collective identity of the people. The dowry rug woven by the bride in order to impress her husband and his family also becomes a shared cultural symbol.



Image 5: Tekke Gül motif. Image courtesy of Brian Macdonald Antique Rugs.



Image 6: National Flag of Turkmenistan. Image courtesy of Encyclopaedia Britannica.



Image 7: Jaipur Garden Carpet. Image courtesy of Albert Hall Museum, Jaipur.



Image 8: Detail of central pool of the Jaipur Garden Carpet. Image courtesy of Albert Hall Museum, Jaipur.

EXPRESSIONS OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND HERITAGE

The Persian carpet tradition stands among the pinnacles of textile art, renowned for its refinement of design and mastery of technique. One exemplary piece is the Jaipur Garden Carpet (Image 7), woven in Kirman, Persia (present day Iran) in the late 16th to early 17th century and acquired by the ruler of Jaipur in 1632 for the Amer Palace. Today it can be seen in the Albert Hall Museum, Jaipur and represents the Persian concept of *Chaharbagh* – the four-part garden that has always held a special status among carpet connoisseurs.

The concept of *Chaharbagh* originated in ancient Persia about 2,500 years ago. After the Islamic conquest of Persia in the 7th century, the concept became a representation of Paradise as mentioned in the Quran. A typical *Chaharbagh* is a garden divided into four quadrants by waterways or pathways, and the axial waterways join at a small square basin at the centre of the garden.

On the Jaipur Garden Carpet, this concept unfolds across an intricately detailed surface – waterways teeming with fish and turtles, plots blooming with trees and flowers, and fauna ranging from deer to mythical *qilin*. At the centre lies a pavilion crowned with a blue-tiled onion dome (Image 8). This is not just decoration, but a cultural and religious tradition represented on a carpet.

REPRESENTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Beyond cultural traditions, carpets can also serve as representations of religious beliefs, and Islamic prayer carpets are ideal examples. The worshipper stands, sits, prostrates and touches one's forehead to the ground while reciting the ritual prayers. Typically small and portable, they provide a clean space for prayer, oriented towards Mecca.

The most distinctive characteristic of the prayer carpet is the arch design that is generally located in the top centre of the carpet and may have been derived from the *Mihrab* or the prayer niche in a mosque. This design feature gives the carpets a directionality which is very useful for the worshipper, who just needs to orient the arch towards the *qibla* (direction of Mecca). But there is a deep metaphorical meaning of this arch as well, which is the gateway leading to Paradise. In Islamic thought, Paradise is a lush, green garden with abundant, delicious fruits and flowing rivers, with a gateway for entry. The second distinctive characteristic seen on many prayer carpets is the mosque lamp suspended just below the arch. The lamp and the light that shines through it are metaphors for Allah's divine presence as described in the Surah al Noor in the Qur'an.

This prayer carpet from Istanbul, Turkey (Image 9) dated around 1575–90 expands the single-arch form to three arches. Beneath the arches, flowering plants bloom as a visual reminder of the lush gardens of Paradise. The mosque lamp is seen hanging just below the central arch, alluding to divine presence.

The prayer carpet is much more than just ritual equipment. It is a visual reminder of the rewards of leading a just and pious life.

TESTAMENT TO GLOBAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Carpets also embody stories of cross-cultural interactions. Legends of magic flying carpets are found in many cultures. In reality, carpets did journey to faraway distant lands over land and seas trade routes.

One striking case is the Japanese *Jinbaori* – sleeveless coats worn by samurai over armour. By the late 16th century, Japanese warlords had access to exotic materials like peacock feathers, bear fur and hare fur, as well as luxurious, imported textiles like Chinese silk brocades, European wool and even Persian carpets through the European traders. Soon *Jinbaori* made using these materials were worn to display power, wealth and status, and were often embellished with bold, high-contrast graphics like family crests to convey strength and power.

The *daimyo* (samurai leader) Toyotomi Hideyoshi (r. 1585–1598) owned a *Jinbaori* made from a Persian silk, tapestry-weave carpet (Image 10). The coat has been preserved over the centuries by the Kodai-ji Temple in Kyoto and is now displayed in the Kyoto National Museum. The most prominent element of the design are the large medallions, which feature a feline attacking its prey (also called 'animals in combat'). This is the same imagery seen in the Sanguszko carpets that were woven in Kashan or Kirman in Iran during the 16th and 17th centuries (Image 11).

The general design of these Sanguszko carpets has a large central medallion and four quartered medallions at the four corners, with intricate and elaborate motifs featuring human figures, animals, birds and mythological creatures like dragons, phoenixes and *qilin*. The 'animals in combat' motif is rooted in ancient Persian iconography and has been used since pre-Islamic times, while the mythological creatures are a Chinese influence that travelled across Asia through Mongol conquests and trade.

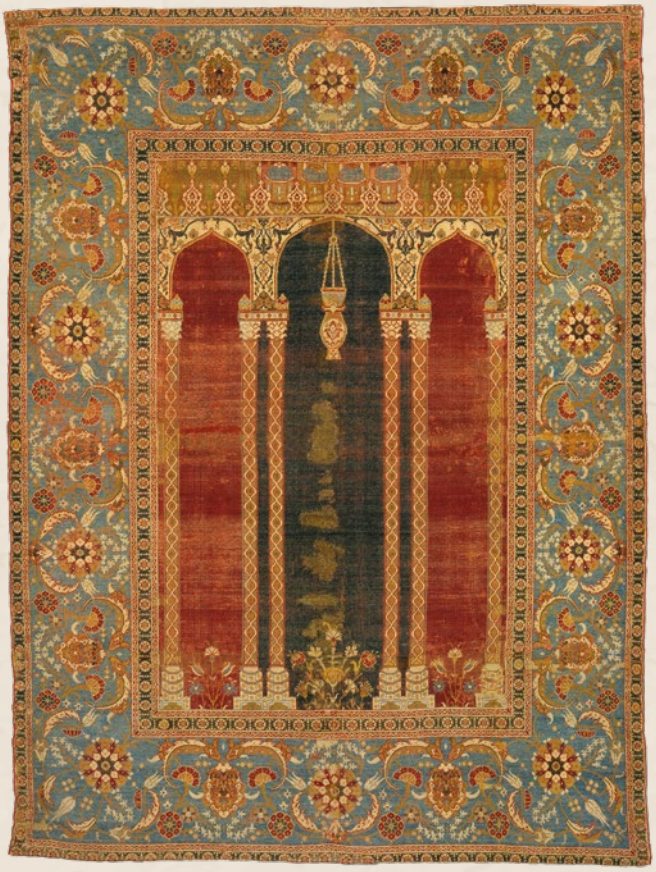


Image 9: Turkish Prayer carpet. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Image 10: Jinbaori *of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Image courtesy of Kyoto National Museum, Kyoto, Japan.*

By turning an expensive, imported carpet into a *jinbaori*, Hideyoshi amply displayed his strength, power, wealth and status. It is a fascinating representation of the global circulation of objects where there was cross-pollination of artistic traditions, and meanings were reconfigured.

CONCLUSION

Carpets are not silent objects. They speak in motifs, patterns and colours. They are repositories of human stories – visual representations of history, identity, tradition, faith and interconnectedness. So, the next time you see a carpet whether it is a family heirloom, a museum artefact or a carpet in a showroom, take a closer look. Far from being just floor coverings, carpets are storytellers – threads that bind art and life, warp and weft, past and present.



Image 11: Animal in combat detail of Sanguszko carpets. Image courtesy of The Miho Museum, Shigaraki, Japan.

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MORE THAN CLOUD HAIR, FLOWERY FACES AND GOLDEN BU YAO HAIRPINS: LADIES' HEADDRESSES FROM TANG TO QING

PHOEBE ZHANG DELVES INTO THE INTRICATE BEAUTY OF ANCIENT CHINESE HEADDRESSES, CONTEMPLATING THE IMPLIED NARRATIVES THAT LIE BEYOND THEIR APPEARANCE

Throughout the millennia of ancient Chinese history, women's headdresses played a vital and multifaceted role in fashion and culture. Crafted from a wide array of materials – some opulent like jade, pearls, gold, silver, emeralds and vibrant kingfisher feathers; others relatively humble, like coloured glasses, cloth, silk or even bark – these ornate accessories served practical purposes, expressed aesthetic ideals, signified social status and reflected the broader cultural and societal values of their time.

TWO SIDES OF TANG WOMEN

When it comes to women's headdresses in the Tang dynasty (618–907CE), many think of the elegant, full-figured women depicted in the painting, *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* (簪花仕女图).

Yet a stunning gold octagonal cup from the Tang Shipwreck, housed in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum, reveals another facet of Tang culture – one shaped by foreign influence.

The influence of *Hu* culture, originating in Central Asia and introduced to China through the nomadic peoples of the northwest began shaping Chinese fashion in early periods and continued to do so through the height of the Tang dynasty. Accessories such as hats evolved alongside shifting tastes and social trends but remained consistently influenced by the nomadic styles.

Tang women, known for their relative freedom and active roles in society, often took part in outdoor activities like horseback riding. To accommodate such pursuits, they adopted the *wei mao* (帷帽), a veiled hat originally worn



Tang dynasty ceramic depicting a woman in wei mao. *Photo taken by Phoebe Zhang.*



Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers *portrays Tang dynasty noblewomen adorned with intricate hairpins, dangling ornaments, headdresses and large, vividly coloured flowers in hair. These noblewomen – one holds flowers, the others play with a dog or stroll at ease with their varied expressions – radiate a graceful charm. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.*



Detail from Governor's Lady Respecting the Buddha. *Mural from Cave 130 of Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, copied by Duan Wenjie, Director of Dunhuang Academy. Each phoenix clasps a pearl-tasselled pendant in its beak, showcasing the fine craftsmanship. One can easily imagine the pendants swaying gracefully with Thirteen Niang's every movement.*

by nomads for protection against wind and dust. Once introduced to central China, this practical headgear evolved into a fashionable accessory among aristocratic women. As recorded in the *Old Book of Tang*, "Following the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (690–705CE), the veiled hat became widespread (则天之后，帷帽大行)."

Over time, society became even more open. By the Kaiyuan reign of Emperor Xuanzong (713–741CE), the *wei mao* was gradually replaced by the veil-less *hu mao* (胡帽). During this period, another striking fashion trend emerged – women began wearing men's clothing. As recorded in *New Book of Tang* (新唐书), they "also dressed in men's clothing, stepping out of their homes (并着男装，走出家门)." These fashion trends weren't confined to the nobles' circle. By the early Tianbao period (742–756CE), *Hu*-style clothing and hats had become popular among both nobles and commoners.

PHOENIX: FROM *FENG CHAI* TO *FENG GUAN*, FROM ROYAL MOTIF TO MUSEUM'S STAR PIECE

Beyond horse riding, for daily life, Tang women were known for wearing *bu yao* hairpins – ornamental hairpins that dangled and swayed with their movement, adding a graceful flourish to their appearance. Among the many hairpin designs throughout Chinese dynasties, *feng* (phoenix) stood out as one of the most enduring and beloved motifs, symbolising beauty and nobility.



Ming Empress Xiaoduan's iconic feng guan *featuring nine dragons and nine phoenixes. Images courtesy of National Museum of China.*



Yuan noblewoman wearing gugu *hat. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.*

A striking example can be seen in a mural from the Tang Tianbao period (742–756CE) in Cave 130 of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, where the female donor, Thirteen Niang, is portrayed wearing *feng chai* (phoenix hairpins) on either side of her head.

The prominence of the phoenix motif continued beyond the Tang dynasty. Following the fragmentation of China during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, a new era of cultural splendor emerged with the Song dynasty (960–1276CE).

In the Song dynasty, the *feng guan* (phoenix crown) was officially established as the ceremonial headwear for empresses and imperial consorts, formalising the phoenix's role in imperial iconography. By the Southern Song period, *feng guan* became even more elaborate, with dragon motifs added to accompany the phoenix, symbolising the harmony between empress and emperor.

According to *History of Song, On Attire and Regulations* (宋史 •與服制), during major state ceremonies and rituals, the empress and empress dowager wore "Dragon-Phoenix Flower Hairpin Crowns" adorned with nine dragons and four phoenixes, having two side pendants hanging down, and topped with 24 floral decorations.

Long known only from paintings, the discovery of four actual *feng guan* belonging to royal women in the tomb of Wanli, the 13th emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644CE), amazed the public. One of the four phoenix crowns, empress Xiaoduan's nine-dragon-nine-phoenix headdress is exhibited in the National Museum of China. The front of the crown is decorated with nine golden dragons, each holding pearl tassels in their mouths. Below them are eight kingfisher-feather-encrusted golden phoenixes, with an additional golden phoenix at the back, making a total of nine dragons and nine phoenixes. The phoenixes face downward, each holding a pearl tassel in its beak. These tassels sway gently as the wearer moves, similar to *bu yao*. The crown is inlaid with over one hundred gemstones and embroidered with more than four thousand pearls. The golden dragons appear to soar through a sea of green clouds, while the phoenixes glide elegantly among jewelled floral clusters.

This artefact is unquestionably the star exhibit at the National Museum of China in Beijing. Visitors wait in line for hours just to catch a brief glimpse of the intricate headdress. Inspired by this piece, the museum's phoenix crown-themed refrigerator magnet has remained its top-selling souvenir for the past two decades and is considered one of the most sought-after cultural and creative products in Beijing today.

YUAN *GUGU:* LOFTY HEADWEAR, LOFTIER STATUS

Between Song and Ming dynasties, there was a distinctive dynasty in China's history called Yuan (1271–1368CE). Established by Kublai Khan, a descendant of Genghis Khan – the legendary Mongol leader who created the largest land empire in history – the Yuan dynasty was characterised by its cultural roots of Mongols.

Coming from a horse-riding culture, Mongol noblewomen wore a unique tall, towering hat called *gugu*, a transliteration of its original Mongolian name. *Travels to the West of Qiu Changchun* (长春真人西游记) written by Taoist monk Qiu Chuji noted: "Women wear birch-bark hats about two feet high, often covered with dark brown cloth, and the wealthy use red silk. The end resembles goose or duck. The name is *Gugu* (其末如鹅鸭，名曰故故)."

This uniquely shaped women's headdress was made either from birch wood sourced from the northeast or from iron, covered externally with velvet brocade and decorated with pearls and jade. The bright feather ornaments on top had to be removed temporarily while entering into tents and were held by a maid, to be worn again once inside.

QING *DIANZI :* CEREMONIAL HEADDRESSES WORN BY MANCHU WOMEN

Another significant non-Han regime in Chinese history was the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912CE), established by the Manchu people. When they came to rule the Central Plains, the Manchus brought with them distinctive cultural

traditions, including their fashion. One notable example is the *qi tou* (旗头), headdresses of adult Manchu women. Among its various styles, the *dian zi* (钿子) stood out as a ceremonial headdress for noblewomen during festivals and celebratory events.

In the Manchu language, *dian zi* translates to 'hat ring,' referencing its structure formed around a circular iron frame. The base – crafted from rattan strips or wire wrapped in black silk – was often shaped into auspicious motifs and richly decorated with pearls and gemstones.

Originating during the Kangxi reign, the *dian zi* continued to develop through the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods, becoming increasingly elaborate. Its striking appearance caught the eye of the renowned Scottish traveller, geographer and photographer John Thomson (1837–1921). *Dian zi* remained an important ceremonial accessory for noblewomen until the end of the Qing Dynasty.



This photograph was taken at around 1870s by John Thomson. It depicts a young Manchu noblewoman dressed in wedding attire. She is wearing elaborately embroidered clothing and a dazzling dian zi *headdress. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.*

A HISTORY AS RICH AND VARIED AS THE HEADDRESSES THEMSELVES

While the history of the Han ethnic group forms the main parts of Chinese history, the Chinese dynasties were, in reality, vast and multi-ethnic empires. The histories and cultures of minority groups have always been integral to the broader Chinese story. In addition, foreign influences have continually shaped Chinese material culture. Rather than being fixed or homogeneous, Chinese culture has evolved through a complex and dynamic process of adaptation, exchange and integration, making it as diverse as it is enduring.

FOR FURTHER READING

Congwen Shen (沈從文), *Research on Ancient Chinese Clothing* (中國古代服飾研究)

PHOEBE ZHANG is an FOM docent at the Peranakan Museum. She seeks knowledge, truth and a broader horizon.

Colours of Asia



Artist: Tay Bak Koi, Title: Three buffalos in the fountain,
Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 1m x 1m.



Artist: Dr Ho Kah Leong, Title: Lorong Buangkok
Medium: Acrylic on canvas, Size: 92cm x 61cm.

Venue: TAG @ TPD
39 Keppel Road
#02-01B Lobby A
Tanjong Pagar Distripark
Singapore 089065

Time: 12pm - 6pm daily

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CROWNS AND OTHER ROYAL PARAPHERNALIA IN THE MALAY WORLD

FROM ANCIENT RELICS TO BRAND NEW BAUBLES, **KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN** UNCOVERS WHY ROYAL REGALIA ARE MORE THAN JUST PRETTY ORNAMENTS

Crowns and regalia have long played an important role in Malay culture and history. The succession dispute that the British cunningly exploited when founding their settlement in Singapore dragged on for years. Because the Sultan's widow withheld the royal regalia, neither candidate was formally accepted at court.

Royal regalia still play an important role in the Malay world, but one custom is noteworthy: traditionally Malay rulers don't wear a crown but a *tengkolok diraja* – a cloth headdress instead. How did this come about? A popular legend from the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) recounts that Sang Nila Utama, a prince from Palembang, threw his crown into the sea to calm a storm near the Singapore coast. Descendants of Sang Nila Utama moved on to found the Melaka Sultanate, and after they were ousted by the Portuguese, started two important Malay Sultanates. One brother went to Perak, bringing Melaka's royal regalia with him – the Perak Annals recount their founder losing his crown in the sea near Klang, after which he declared no Perak ruler would ever wear a crown again. The second brother founded the Sultanate of Johor.

Let's have a closer look at the regalia of Perak and Johore.



A close-up of the Cura Si Manjakini *sword. Image courtesy of the Perak royal website.*

THE ANCIENT PERAK ROYAL REGALIA

Claiming direct descent from the Melaka Sultans, the royal family of Perak holds some ancient artefacts in their collection. *Cura Si Manjakini* is said to be the sword of Sang Nila Utama's legendary forebear, Sang Suparba. In the *Sejarah Melayu* the sword slays a mythical serpent that ravages the crops of the Minangkabau of Sumatra, after which Sang Suparba is made their king. With the crown gone, this sword became the main symbol of sovereignty to the Malay and was allegedly used for the installation of the Melaka Sultans.

The Perak royal family also holds a *kanching*, a 15th century collar embroidered with dragons, said to be a gift from the Chinese emperor to the Melaka Sultan, and a *keris* allegedly owned by the famous Melaka warrior Hang Jebat. Another intriguing item is the *cap halilintar*, a small silver seal which has the name of one of the early Melaka sultans engraved on it. It is said that the original seal had an engraving in Sanskrit, which was changed to Arabic when the sultans embraced Islam.



Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah of Perak, with his wife, at his 2015 coronation, wearing the pontoh bernaga *on his arms and the* cap halilintar *in his royal head cloth. Image courtesy of Sultan Perak official website.*

Regalia can be decorative as well as meaningful, like the *pontoh bernaga*, gold armlets with dragon heads, worn on the upper arms of the Sultan and Sultana of Perak during the installation ceremony. Dragons were often featured in Malay weaponry as symbols of power, bravery and strength. The



Close up of pontoh bernaga. *Image courtesy of Sultan Perak official website and its digital book.*



Close up of cap halilintar. *Image courtesy of Sultan Perak official website and its digital book.*

armlets too allegedly date back to the Melaka Sultanate. If there is truth in these claims, the Perak sword could even date back to the Chola kings of Southern India, but unfortunately none of the Perak regalia have been analysed by experts, and their exact age and provenance is not known.

SPLENDOUR IN THE JOHOR SULTANATE

The Sultans of Johor Lama (Old Johor) were forced to move around, facing constant attack from both the Portuguese and Aceh. Until 1824, when colonial treaties cut the Sultanate in pieces, their territory included the Riau islands and Singapore. The current Sultans of Johor Bahru (New Johor) hail from a different family, that of the Temenggongs of Johor - officials who had been in charge of national security.



Painting of Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar of Johor and his wife Raja Zarith Sofiah. Image courtesy of the Malaysian News Herald.

Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim started gambier and pepper plantations in Johor in the 19th century and later moved his administration from Singapore to the new capital of Johor Bahru. His son Abu Bakar became one of the world's wealthiest men and it comes as no surprise that he splurged on some very pretty baubles when he was granted the title of Sultan by Queen Victoria in 1886.



The Johor State Crown and Diadem. Image courtesy of the official website of Sultan Ibrahim, Sultan of Johor.

Not hindered by myths of legendary royal ancestors, Abu Bakar got himself a magnificent crown. As an anglophile and friend of Queen Victoria, he had it made in London, modelled after the British crown, with the cross at the top replaced by the Islamic crescent and stars. It is made from gold and silver, embedded with thousands of diamonds, and many large rubies, emeralds and sapphires.

A matching diamond diadem was designed for the royal consort, but it is said Abu Bakar's second wife and main consort, Sultana Fatimah, did not wish to be crowned, and it is not certain whether the diadem was made in 1886 or after he married his fourth wife Khatijah in 1893. Sultana Khatijah was crowned in a private ceremony with only female guests present, and unfortunately there are no known photos of the event. Around 1900 she was photographed wearing another beautiful diamond tiara, which has been seen worn by many Johor royal wives since.



Photo of Abu Bakar in full regalia at his coronation. The State crown at the top, the sceptres of religion and universe below in the photo. Image courtesy of Peggy Loh from the blog, My Johor Stories.



Sultana Khatijah wearing the Johor diamond tiara, taken circa 1900. Image courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

Another notable item in the Johor collection are two gold sceptres, of which the *Cogan Agama*, the sceptre of religion, has an interesting design inspired by Johor Bahru's heritage, with a betel leaf shape, and pepper vine and gambier leaf carvings surrounding the handle.

The attention shown to regalia during the coronations of both the Sultans of Johor and Perak in 2015 demonstrates how they are still relevant to the royals that wear them. Most of us can't help being awed by their splendour, the shiny gold, sparkling gems, craftsmanship and ancient vintage - whether we are royalists or not. One thing is certain: the rich history and heritage of these regalia is priceless.



Cogan Agama. *Image courtesy of the website of Sultan Ibrahim, Sultan of Johor.*



The Johor diamond tiara worn by Sultana Khatijah (left) and a succession of Johor royals Image courtesy of The Royal Watcher blog.

KARIEN VAN DITZHUIJZEN is a novelist, tour guide, and Kampong Gelam Heritage Trail docent.

PRETTY AS A PEACOCK

DARLENE KASTEN CELEBRATES THE PEACOCK IN ASIA, BOTH AS A SYMBOL AND AS A MATERIAL

All photos are courtesy of the Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, unless otherwise noted.

The male Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*), or peacock, is more than just a pretty face; this magnificent bird is deeply intertwined with the cultural, religious, and artistic traditions of Asia.



This pair of gold, ruby and diamond peacock earrings was probably used to adorn the Subrahmanya icon. Deity jewellery belongs to a group of ritual objects that would have received royal or noble patronage and was donated to temples and monasteries of Vaishnavas (devotees of Vishnu) in Tamil Nadu, Karanataka or Kerala.



A set of 12 tiles that show the Hindu God of War with accessories including a vel *(spear) and peacock.*

THE PEACOCK IN INDIA

As the national bird of India, the peacock is highly revered and symbolic, often depicted in Hindu mythology, Buddhist stories, and Jain traditions.

The Hindu god, Lord Krishna, wears a peacock feather in his crown. A legend says peacocks were so enchanted by his flute-playing, they laid their feathers on the ground before him, and he promised to wear them forever. Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of wisdom and music, is often associated with a peacock in South India (a swan elsewhere), where the peacock serves as her mount, symbolising her connection with beauty, creativity, and wisdom. The Hindu god of war, Murugan (also called Subrahmanya, Karthikeya, or Skanda), uses the peacock as his vehicle, symbolising devotion, loyalty, and humility.

You have probably noticed auspicious peacock feathers as decoration in Hindu celebrations and rituals, most notably Diwali, the Festival of Lights, and Thaipusam, an important Tamil Hindu festival held on the first full moon day of the Tamil month of Thai. Thaipusam commemorates the victory of Lord Murugan over the demon Surapadman. During the battle, Murugan is believed to have wielded a *vel*, a divine spear granted by his mother, Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva. The festival is celebrated in Singapore every year with an elaborate procession featuring *vels* and worshippers bearing heavy *kavadi* (burdens) adorned with peacock feathers.

THE PEACOCK IN CHINA

As early as the Tang dynasty (618 to 907 CE), peacocks were well known in China, their feathers already being used both for imperial decoration and for the designation of official rank. The peacock denotes elevated rank and its accompanying traits of wealth and power. The peacock is one of only nine birds adorned on silk rank badges (*buzi*) worn on the surcoats of the literati elite, the powerful scholar-officials or mandarins who acted as civil servants and as counsellors to the emperor and imperial court. Each emblematic species of bird denoted a specific rank within the government hierarchy. On public occasions, mandarins of high rank (fifth



*Embroidered badge (*buzi*) for a third rank civil official with details picked out in peacock feather filament. Late seventeenth century. Exhibition catalogue image 57 by Lee Chee Kheong for* Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection. *Published in 2006 by the Asian Civilisations Museum.*

and above), who had permission, could also attach peacock feather plumes to their cap buttons. Peacock feathers were seen as a sign of great honour and wearing them showed recognition by the emperor for exemplary services rendered.

The association between nobility and the peacock was more subtle when textiles were embellished using threads made with actual peacock feathers. The iridescence from the peacock feathers was used to add natural lustre to luxurious textiles and produce a shimmering effect when worn. Peacock feather thread was thought to have begun in China in the 5th century. However, the first preserved examples date to the early Qing dynasty, such as a 17th century badge with a peacock for a third-rank civil official belonging to textile collector and scholar Chris Hall.

PERANAKAN PEACOCKS

The Chinese association of peacocks with beauty and nobility was embraced by Chinese Peranakans in the former Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore, as exemplified by a ruby red silk robe with a silk embroidered peacock as its central focus.

While wealthy Peranakans may have commissioned their sumptuous silk embroidered wedding garments



This red-wine coloured silk robe suitable for a Peranakan groom is richly embroidered with auspicious symbols such as the peacock in silk and gold thread couching.



Peranakan shoes started to be made with higher heels in the early 20th century as a way of expressing modernity. Designs drew on traditional Chinese metal thread embroidery but were more decorative and less overtly symbolic.

from China, other accessories were typically made locally. *Nonya* needlework was used to fashion many Peranakan accoutrements associated with the wedding, including slippers (*kasut*), belt purses (*o pau*), handkerchiefs (*bim poh lenggang*), and extravagant decorations for the wedding chamber.

Auspicious patterns were worked by skilled Nonyas in silk floss and twisted silk yarns, glass and metal beads, and gold and silver threads of different textures. On rare occasions, iridescent peacock feather threads, following on from the established Chinese practice. Singapore has several examples of the latter in its national collection, with a handful of slippers, belt purses and a magnificent food cover on display in the textile gallery at the Peranakan Museum.



Detail shows how the iridescent blue peacock filament threads stand out dramatically against the gold-wrapped silk ones. Photo by author.

These examples include a modern-looking pair of high-heeled slippers featuring couched and basketweave gold thread embroidery outlined in iridescent blue peacock filament-wrapped silk thread. Its higher heels may say 'modern', but its style of craftsmanship is more reminiscent of late 19th century Nonya needlework, where couching and raised embroidery techniques are also found on more traditional Peranakan footwear.

PEACOCK POWER!

Look for more peacocks on parade at the Peranakan Museum during the special exhibition dedicated to 'everything peacock', open from 31 October 2025 to 30 August 2026.

DARLENE KASTEN is as proud as a peacock to have served as an FOM docent at the Malay Heritage Centre, the Asian Civilisations Museum , STPI Creative Workshop and Gallery and The Peranakan Museum in Singapore.

KAMPONG GELAM'S BEJEWELLED LEGACY

JULINA KHUSAINI GOES DOWN MEMORY LANE IN SINGAPORE'S KAMPONG GELAM TO UNCOVER THE GLITZ BEHIND ITS GLAMOUROUS REPUTATION

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NEW MYSTERY UNCOVERED

Whilst going through some of my late father's documents, I stumbled upon two yellow receipts from Nam Hing Lin Kee Goldsmith and Jeweller located at 150 Arab Street. What's clear: some kind of jewellery was bought. But I did not know what or when these were purchased, as everything was handwritten in Chinese. A pair of dangling *intan* earrings, a family heirloom worn by my late mother during her wedding, came to mind. Could these be the items mentioned in those receipts? I started tracking down the family who used to run the goldsmith shop to find out.



A family heirloom, a pair of intan *dangling earrings, possibly worn by the writer's late mother during her wedding in 1965.*

UNCOVERING A GLITTERING NEIGHBOURHOOD

Six-degrees of separation later, a friend connected me to Mr Daniel Thong, a third-generation member of the family who used to run the goldsmith business there. His uncle, Mr Richard Thong, who helped out at the shop from the age of 15, shared that his late father, Mr Thong Yam Ling, from Guangzhou, China, had apprenticed at the goldsmith shop in Arab Street before taking over the business in 1958. The family then ran the business until about 2000. "There were at least six goldsmith shops along our row in Arab Street. Like us, their customers were mostly the Malays. We learnt how to speak Malay by listening to the Rediffusion radio station. We think that they – the Malays – were very smart to invest in gold at that time. During Hari Raya, or when they have surplus money after selling off their HDB flat, they will come to '*tukar tambah emas*' – exchange and add more gold."

The oldest goldsmith shop, On Cheong Jeweller, began business at 454 North Bridge Road in 1936. Poh Heng Goldsmith, another well-known homegrown jewellery brand, was at 691 North Bridge Road. By the1960s, Singapore was gaining a reputation as a regional gold distribution centre. As the gold market became more developed in the 1970s and 1980s, more goldsmith shops began to house their businesses along Arab Street, North Bridge Road and South Bridge Road (which became known as 'Goldsmiths Row'). These shops were dominated by Chinese merchants of diverse origins – Cantonese, Hakkas, Hokkiens and Teochews.

Close by, where Golden Landmark Shopping Centre is today, that area used to be known as Kampong Selong (or Ceylon), so named after the gemstone merchants and jewellery artisans from Sri Lanka. Indian and Sinhalese jewellers are known to have been working in the region as early as the 14th century and they are likely to have been active in Singapore by the 1820s. Next to Arab Street, one can also find diamond polishing workshops and artisans conducting their business, earning the area its name, Kampong Intan (Diamond Village), present day Baghdad Street.



Archive photo of 150 Arab Street. The Chinese characters of the shop's name, Nam Hing Lin Kee Goldsmith, *were cast in Mr Thong's own calligraphic script. Daniel Thong, one of Mr Thong's grandsons, bought this photo of the shop which showed his grandfather's white Mercedes parked in front of the shop. In front of the photo are ingots melted down from some of the gold left behind, as well as a silver* pending *(belt buckle).*



A collection of old receipts from various goldsmith and jewellery shops found on Arab Street and North Bridge Road. Image courtesy of Mr Rossman Ithnain. The two receipts from Nam Hing Lin Kee Goldsmith were found by the writer amongst her late father's belongings.

FROM THE RIVER WHERE DIAMONDS FLOW

The Urang Banjar or Banjarese, from the cities of Banjarmasin and Martapura in South Kalimantan (which literally means Diamond River), are believed to have traded their *intan* (raw and uncut diamonds) and *berlian* (cut and polished diamonds) in Singapore since the 1820s. Three Urang Banjars dominated this trade – Haji Mahmood Abdul Rahim, Haji Osman bin Haji Naim (also known as 'Haji Osman Kaya' or 'the Rich Haji Osman') and Haji Mohd Hassan bin Haji Mohd Salleh. Hj Ahmad Jamal bin Haji Mohd Hassan, the eldest son of Haji Mohd Hassan, inherited the business and was the last diamond merchant operating at Jalan Pisang in Kampong Gelam in the 20th century. He was famous for his designs and fine craftsmanship.

According to Ms Faridah Jamal, Haji Ahmad Jamal's daughter, her grandfather arrived in Singapore in 1926 with his two younger brothers. "My grandfather was gifted a diamond brooch, which was his capital to start a diamond business in Singapore. My father's talent was to design jewellery sets, and customers came either to have new items or jewellery sets designed by him, or to buy ready-made rings, and reset the loose jewellery items. So, certain things, he might connect with the Chinese goldsmith, like this goldsmith shop Nam Loong at Arab Street, which I remember was called An Nam."

GOLD, DIAMONDS AND *INTANS* ARE FOREVER… OR NOT?

Gold, *intan* and *berlian* jewellery were much regarded as an investment or as savings, representing both wealth and status. Most were also meant to be passed down as family heirlooms. According to jewellery and art collector, Mr Rossman Ithnain, "*Berlian* was considered 'high end,' representing status and wealth, and worn on very special occasions. However, *intan* was preferred as it was more affordable and safer to wear – even for everyday use – especially among the wealthy Arabs, Malays and Peranakans."



Ms Faridah Jamal holding the small dacing *(a balance) used to measure the weight of the* intan. *In front of her are other instruments used for measuring diamonds and the size of a ring.*

Unfortunately, the jewellery trade in Kampong Gelam began to decline due to urban redevelopment, changing demographics, and customer preferences. In the 1970s, shophouses in Kampong Gelam had to make way for urban redevelopment and many goldsmiths there moved to Chinatown to be closer to the Chinese clientele, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. The subsequent relocation of the Malay community to new housing estates in those years significantly altered the customer base for goldsmith shops on Arab Street. With a maturing economy and advancements in jewellery techniques that use machines to add new symmetry and higher shine, craftsmen had to diversify their designs, and businesses began to open shops in upscale malls instead of traditional heritage districts. Artisanal craftsmanship in jewellery became hard to sustain and most second-generation members moved on to other businesses. There are still a handful of goldsmiths and shops selling gemstones on Arab Street and in Golden Landmark Mall, but today 150 Arab Street is home to a popular pizzeria.

IS THE MYSTERY SOLVED?

Unfortunately, not. And it unearthed more questions than answers. My receipts for the purchase of a pair of diamond, heart-shaped ear studs and two gold necklaces were dated 1984, but my parents were married in 1965. Anniversary gifts maybe? But, as I don't remember seeing my late mum wearing such jewellery and none of these items are currently in my possession, my questions remain unanswered…for now.



This jewellery collection of Mr Rossman Ithnain shows some examples of intan *jewellery, providing a glimpse of the type of jewellery that would have been found at a typical jewellery shop in Kampong Gelam of that era. Popular designs include the* buah kana *(olive-seed) sharp oval-shaped ring popular for engagements. Apart from* intan, *colourful stones known as 'Batu Ceylon' became popular in the 1960s.*

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SACRED THREADS: BEADS AS TOOLS OF DEVOTION AND PROTECTION

PAVITHRA KABIR DELVES INTO THE SACRED JOURNEY OF BEADS – FROM HUMBLE TOOLS OF PRAYER AND MEDITATION TO ORNATE SYMBOLS OF FAITH, PROTECTION AND PRESTIGE ACROSS WORLD RELIGIONS

Throughout history, prayer beads and spiritual jewellery have served as tools for devotion, meditation and protection across religions. Ancient tribal societies used beads as amulets in burial rites, while in Eastern religions, bead necklaces aided prayer, meditation and divine connection. The Abrahamic faiths also have methods of counting commandments, or reciting prayers and the name of God. Over time, these beads, threads and knots evolved into wearable jewellery, blending spiritual significance with personal expressions of devotion and faith. The materials – ranging from wood and seeds to gemstones and metals – carry symbolic meanings, reinforcing the sacred connection between the physical and the divine.

JAPAMALAS: THE SPIRITUAL GARLAND OF THE EAST

The evolution of beads as a prayer tool can likely be traced back to ancient India and Hinduism and the use of *japamalas*. *Japa* refers to the repetition of the name of a deity or a sacred utterance called a *mantra*, while *mala*, from Sanskrit, means 'garland' or 'wreath.' *Japamala* beads serve both as prayer counters and symbols of spiritual power. The number and materials of the beads vary according to the cult or sect within Hinduism.



Shiva in Benares (Kashi Vishvanatha), *ca. 1880–1900, India. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

A Shaivite, or worshipper of Shiva, would use a string of 32 beads made from the seed of the *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*, known as *Rudraksha*, which literally means 'eye of the god Rudra' (an ancient name for Shiva). These beads were believed to provide spiritual benefits, focus and protection. Shiva himself, in his ascetic form, was often portrayed wearing a *rudraksha mala*.

Followers of Vishnu, or Vaishnavites, prefer beads made from another holy plant – the *Tulasi* – and their *mala* typically comprises 108 beads. Buddhism adopted a similar *mala*, reflecting its Indian roots and the Hindu view of Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu. While the number of beads remains 108, in Buddhism this corresponds to the number of mental conditions or sinful inclinations to be overcome through meditation and recitation. Buddhist beads are often crafted from bodhi seeds, symbolizing the Buddha's enlightenment.



Rudraksha *Prayer Beads, 19th century, Tibet. Image courtesy of Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art.*

In Jainism, the *Navkarwali mala* symbolizes the 108 attributes of the five supreme beings. In keeping with Jain tenets, the beads are made from simple and non-violent materials such as *tulsi* wood, sandalwood, crystal or lotus seeds.



Gauri Shankar *necklace, 18th century, Tamil Nadu. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore.*



Ivory and silver Rosary, ca.1500-1525, Germany. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

DIVINE ADORNMENTS: SHAIVITE JEWELLERY AND RITUAL POWER

As prayer beads evolved, their spiritual significance began to merge with artistic expression – particularly in Shaivite traditions where jewellery became a medium of devotion. At the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, a stunning *Gauri Shankar* or *Rudraksha* necklace is currently on display. This necklace features *rudraksha* beads alongside intricate motifs like the Dancing Nataraja (Shiva), *makaras* (composite creatures) and other decorative elements. It contains a compartment for a Shiva lingam, and the clasp pendant depicts the 'holy family' of Shiva and Parvati riding on the bull Nandi, accompanied by their sons Ganesh and Kartikeya. This reflects the Shaivite faith in which the 'holy family' is commonly worshipped. Such necklaces were worn by Shaivite devotees and priests in Tamil Nadu.

KNOTS OF FAITH: PRAYER BEADS IN CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

While Judaism does not use prayer beads, it does feature carefully knotted *Tzitzit* or 'ritual fringes' attached to garments. Comprising eight threads and five knots, they



Rosary Bead with the Crucifixion and Resurrection, ca. ca.1500- 1525, Spanish. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Rosary, mid-17th century, German. Image courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

symbolise the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) in the Torah, serving as a physical reminder to observe God's laws. Similarly, Orthodox Christian Churches developed knotted prayer ropes with varying numbers of knots or beads, each with distinct significance – such as the *mequteria* (with 41 beads) used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, or the *Komboskini* or *chotki* (with 33, 50, or 100 knots) used for the Lord's Prayer by the Eastern Orthodox church. Western Christianity had the *Pater Noster* cord (150 beads representing the Psalms), used by monks and some Anglican groups.

The Roman Catholic Rosary (with 59 beads) was formalized by the Church in the 13th century to guide structured devotion, especially to the Virgin Mary. An interesting facet is the symbolic relationship between the Virgin Mary and the rose – much like ancient traditions where specific plants were associated with specific deities. The word 'rosary' itself originates from the Latin *rosarium*, meaning 'rose garden' or 'crown of roses,' symbolizing the spiritual offering of prayers like roses to the Virgin Mary. Also fascinating is the role of the rosary in the spread of Catholicism across Asia. Scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) suggests that



Rosaries with pearl, coral and gold beads, 17th–19th centuries, Philippines. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

prayer beads likely originated in India, spreading eastward with Buddhism and westward into Christian Europe and Islamic cultures via ancient trade routes. The rosary then returned to Asia through colonial evangelical missions, and in newly converted Catholic regions such as India, the Philippines and even Japan, wearing the rosary around the neck became regarded as "the greatest sign of being Christian."



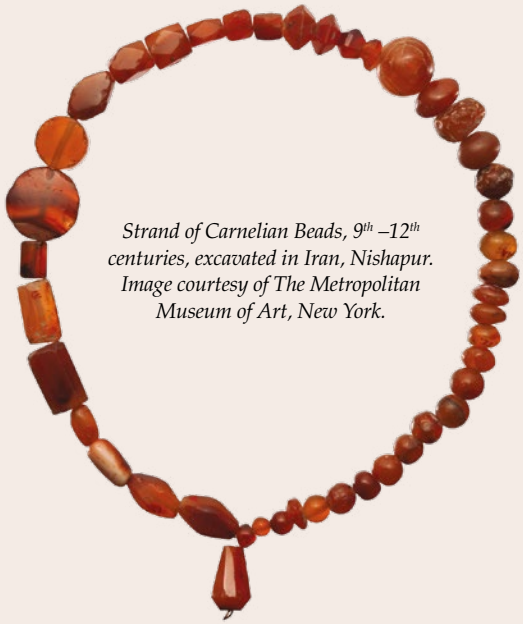
Prayer Bead with the Crucifixion, early 16th century, Netherlandish. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

FROM DEVOTION TO DISPLAY: THE RISE OF ORNAMENTAL ROSARIES

As Christianity gained power, prestige and wealth, we see the humble and often sombre prayer ropes used by monks for contemplation become more decorative and elaborate, evolving from monastic tools to ornate symbols worn by both clergy and wealthy devotees. The materials changed from simple beads to gold, coral, gems and pearl strings, with elaborate pendants. The beads themselves became highly ornate, sometimes carved or painted and depicting scenes from the life of Christ or the Virgin Mary. By the 17th century, rosaries from Spain to the Philippines had transformed from devotional objects into proclamations of faith, power and wealth.



Rosary, partially enamelled gold, with ebony beads, ca. 1700, Spanish. Image courtesy of Sothebys.



Strand of Carnelian Beads, 9th –12th centuries, excavated in Iran, Nishapur. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

MISBAHA: ISLAMIC BEADS AND THE POWER OF REMEMBRANCE

In Islam, a string of prayer beads called *misbaha* was used to facilitate *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) and for *tasbih* (glorification of God). While the beads may be used for the recitation of the 99 names of Allah, the power lies not in the beads but in the name of God and His glorification.

One form of Islamic jewellery associated primarily with men is the *sibha*, or strand of prayer beads having 33 or 99 beads as seen in the portrait of Emperor Akbar, from Mughal India, holding a *sibha* made of pearls and other gems. In later Islamic and Mughal traditions, jewellery evolved to include intricately designed amulets that combined intricate design, carving and calligraphy. These pieces, bearing God's name or verses of glorification, like the Mughal bezel bracelet, were not only expressions of piety but also served as talismans believed to protect the wearer from harm.



Portrait of Emperor Akbar Praying, *early 17th century, India. Ink and watercolour on paper. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

Across cultures and centuries, we see that beads have transcended their material form – becoming conduits of prayer, identity and artistry. Whether worn in silent meditation or displayed in ornate devotion, these sacred threads continue to bind the physical and the divine.



Mughal bezel bracelet with the Throne verse, late 17th century, India. Image courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

FOR FURTHER READING

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's (MetPublications) books on Jewellery, available online.

PAVITHRA KABIR is an FOM docent who likes art, history, philosophy and cake – not necessarily in that order.

A WARM WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

SONAM KUNDU CAPTURES THE BUZZ, WARMTH AND EXCITEMENT OF THE FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUMS AS THE ORGANISATION WELCOMES NEW MEMBERS IN JUNE 2025

Photos taken by Kerstin Kiesselbach.

The bustling lanes of Little India couldn't match the buzz inside the ornate wooden doors of the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC). A lively queue had formed at the registration desk. It was the attendees arriving for the New Members Coffee Morning (NMCM). Held twice a year by the Friends of the Museums (FOM), Singapore, the event welcomes newcomers and introduces them to a variety of opportunities by which to engage in the arts, the history and the culture of the region.



Darly Furlong, Katherine Lim and Andrea Baker at the registration desk.



Dobrina Boneva, Miho Tajimi, Shernaz Varia and Kshama Joglekar of the Textile Enthusiasts Group.

FOM ACTIVITIES GROUPS MAKE THEIR MARK

The morning was filled with anticipation. Attendees were warmly greeted as they mingled over refreshments generously prepared by our wonderful Hospitality team. Volunteer coordinators from various FOM groups were present to share about the many opportunities as well as their insights into volunteer roles. Study Tours members chatted enthusiastically about upcoming trips, while the Curio and Asian Studies Group (ASG) coordinators talked about their future events. The Textile Enthusiasts Group (TEG) displayed handmade fabrics from across Asia, which drew much admiration from new attendees. Meanwhile, recent participants of Explore Singapore! (ES!) shared their experiences with its coordinators.



Jariyah Yussoff and Moushomi Mukherjee from the Hospitality team with Paroma Sen.



Debbie Kobayashi from the Explore Singapore! group with new FOM member V. Vijayakumar.

COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES

Once the attendees were seated, Paroma Sen kicked off the proceedings of the day. Officially welcoming everyone, Paroma, the Council Representative of Volunteer Appreciation and Membership, declared that joining FOM would turn out to be the best gift they will give themselves. When FOM Vice President Karen Ng took the stage, she highlighted FOM's many activities that were on offer and how they gave every member a meaningful way to participate. The audience also learnt about ways to contribute to FOM's magazine, *PASSAGE*, from one of its Co-Managing Editors, Darly Furlong. Linda Lim stood in for the museums, showcasing FOM's guiding programmes. Overall Head of Training Andrea Baker said that even though learning to be a docent was one of the more challenging options on offer, it was also very rewarding.



Seasoned FOM members alongside new members.



IHC docents Navy Paulson and Priya Seshadri.

In a fitting conclusion, all attendees gathered outside the grand doors of IHC where, joined by FOM President Lee Hong Leng, they posed for photos. IHC docents Priya Seshadri and Navy Paulson then guided mini tours offering participants a deeper appreciation of the venue's collections.

CONCLUDING THE EVENT

By the end, a new member was overheard saying, "I've already applied and am eagerly waiting to hear back from the Docent Training Programme 2025." Others made decisions on the spot. Inspired to write, they enquired about FOM's *PASSAGE* magazine. Overall, this edition of New Members' Coffee Morning was a resounding success.

SONAM KUNDU is an FOM docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum and co-coordinates the Monday Morning Lectures series.

THE PRIVATE MUSEUM: NEW KID ON THE FOM BLOCK

DURRIYA DOHADWALA UNVEILS A PRIVATE ART SPACE THAT BRINGS NEW GUIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOM'S ART DOCENTS

All photos are courtesy of The Private Museum.

This year, FOM adds another institution to the repertoire of museums and cultural institutions that its volunteer docents guide at: The Private Museum, an independent arts space, is a registered charity and Institution of a Public Character which opened in 2010 and was founded by Singaporean philanthropist, art collector and real estate developer, Daniel Teo and his daughter, Rachel Teo.



FOM docent, Tabitha Manresa, guiding at The Private Museum.

BRINGING PRIVATE ART COLLECTIONS INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Previously located on Waterloo Street just behind the old Singapore Art Museum building on Bras Basah Road, the Museum moved to the beautifully refurbished historic Osborne House on Emily Hill in late 2023. Its aim is to be a platform to bridge the gap between the private and the public by bringing private art collections, which often remain secluded, into the public sphere.

With its partnership with FOM, The Private Museum hopes to shift the perspective from art collecting as just an act of acquiring artwork to one of telling stories and sharing in the transformative power of art to connect, unite and inspire. For FOM, the partnership will offer our arts docents an opportunity to expand their learning and guide in diverse art spaces.



The Private Museum at Osborne House, 11 Upper Wilkie Road.

FROM A COLONIAL HOME TO A CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE – 200 YEARS AT OSBOURNE HOUSE

Osborne House has a long and interesting history spanning almost 200 years. While its origins and establishment are not completely clear, it is thought to have been built by Charles Prinsep, a barrister with the East India Company who lived in Calcutta. Prinsep bought sizeable tracts of land in Singapore in the early 1800s and among them was Mount Sophia and Mount Emily. While there is no exact date for when the house was built, it is thought to have been in the 1830s as references to the house can be found from 1840 onwards. It is built in the Anglo-Indian style with large overhanging roofs, arched windows and high columns similar to The Arts House, which was built in 1827. According to Richard Hassell, Founder of WOHA Architects who helped restore the building for The Private Museum, Osborne house is probably among the oldest houses in Singapore.

In 1854, Prinsep visited Singapore for the first time and after his return to England, he began selling off his estate in Singapore. From 1871 the house went through a stream of owners and tenants, among them Captain William Wilkinson, the Katz Brothers, and the Sultan of Siak. After the first World War, the house no longer attracted the cream of the colony and in 1935, it was bought by Jukichi Ikeda, a Japanese dentist, who lived there until 1939, when the Japanese Consulate acquired it. After the Second World War, the Social Welfare Department took over the house and it subsequently

served as an orphanage, a home for boys, a halfway house for the rehabilitation of young prostitutes up to the age of 21, a girls home and finally the Wilkie Road Children's Home in the 1980s before becoming one of the facilities of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 2007.



Chua Mia Tee, My Wife, *1980, Oil on canvas.*

In the two years at its current location, The Private Museum has hosted multiple exhibitions – among them a survey show of renowned Thai artist Natee Utarit, which brought together works from a diverse selection of collectors, and the recently concluded show featuring Cultural Medallion recipient Chua Mia Tee and his wife Lee Boon Ngan – a landmark exhibition in conjunction with Singapore's 60th birthday, honouring the love and legacy of two Singaporeans who have dedicated their lives to art and nation.

For its final exhibition of the year, the Private Museum has brought about a monumental exhibition to mark Singapore's 60th anniversary. Titled *Towards Happiness, Prosperity, and Progress: Reflections on the Singapore Spirit* the exhibition runs till 7 December 2025 and features 60 Singaporean and Singapore-based artists, 60 artworks and six local curators – each contributing to a powerful exploration of longing and belonging. Guided by six curatorial perspectives, the exhibition unfolds as a series of artistic dialogues that navigate identity from the intimate to the infrastructural. Across media and generations, these works do not fix the meaning of the Singapore Spirit; they map it in motion. Together they suggest that happiness, prosperity and progress are not endpoints but shared practices – worked out in conversation, revisited across decades, and renewed by those who call Singapore home.



Chua Mia Tee and Lee Boon Ngan by Chua Mia Tee, Forever Etched in Memory *(2017), oil on canvas.*

Join our Monday Morning Lecture on 8 December 2025 where the museum's Associate Director, Aaron Teo will talk about *Patronage in Practice: Insights into Art Ecology.*

The Private Museum is located on 11 Upper Wilkie Rd. Details on opening hours and guided tours can be found on the FOM website.

DURRIYA DOHADWALA is an arts writer and FOM docent who guides at Singapore Art Museum, STPI Creative Workshop and Gallery and The Private Museum.



Chua Mia Tee, Singapore Presidents and their Cabinets, 1996–97, Oil on canvas, Collection of The Istana, Singapore.

WORLD OF COLOURS AND TEXTURES WITH PACITA ABAD

ROOPA DEWAN EXPLORES FILIPINO AMERICAN ARTIST PACITA ABAD'S VIBRANT ART PRACTICE

All photos are courtesy of STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery.

As you walk down Robertson Quay, you cannot miss the iconic Alkaff bridge. Singapore's first art bridge is decorated with 2,350 vibrant, multicoloured circles painted by artist Pacita Abad (1946–2004), just months before she succumbed to cancer – her parting gift to Singapore. In her words:



Pacita Abad on the Alkaff bridge.

"I am thrilled to have been given the opportunity to transform the Alkaff Bridge into a new colourful outdoor sculpture, that I call the 'Painted Bridge'. My hope is that when people look at the fifty-five colours and playful circle designs adorning the Bridge, they will smile and enjoy experiencing art as a part of their daily life".

Abad celebrated the culmination of her residency at Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) in 2004 with this 55 meter long bridge. She stated: "I feel like I am an ambassador of colours, always projecting a positive mood that helps make the world smile".

Initially, Pacita Abad was intent on becoming a lawyer in Batanes where her parents were Congressmen. After Abad joined demonstrations against Marcos's authoritarian regime, her home in Batanes was sprayed with bullets prompting her to escape by relocating to San Francisco. Enrolling in an Asian history course, she was offered a full scholarship to attend law school at UC Berkley. A meeting with Jack Garrity at a regional world affairs conference led her to abandon law and begin her artistic journey with classes at the Corcoran School of Art (1975) and the Art Students League in New York (1977).

Abad resided in fourteen and travelled to over sixty countries. Her travels deeply influenced her work as she absorbed all that she experienced, melding seamlessly the techniques and materials from each place – African tie-dye, Indonesian batik, African bark motifs, Indian mirrors, Nepali beads and sequins, spherical Philippine shells – blending craft traditions with 'high' art, moving from figuration to modern abstraction.



Pacita Abad in action at her studio.

Her monumental 'Trapunto' paintings combine painting with hand quilting, embellished with buttons, batik, and beads, and stand tall. The Italian *trapungere* means 'to embroider' and Abad used canvas and paper as a sculptural material, layering it in circles and adding bits and baubles she collected along the way. She was truly the best advocate for women's work and craft traditions from a multicultural world. Her aesthetic choices in the use of riotous colours were as Victoria Sung, the curator of her recent show at the Walker gallery put it, "diametrically opposed to what would have been defined as good taste" in the 80's and 90's.

At STPI, this sculptural quality was achieved through the use of coloured paper pulp. She enhanced her work with sequins and glitter, patching and collaging. In Abad's words: "One of my main concerns was the texture of the prints. I wanted to create a three-dimensional effect". She used lino blocks, woodcut, lithography and silkscreen to give the prints a bold and flat effect. She added cut fabric, buttons and mirrors to the surface. And finally, she gave playful titles which belie the serious themes she pursued. Her work spanned numerous subjects including social justice, migration, women's cultural traditions and environmental concerns.

Her work was so counter to the mainstream that for almost two decades it was ignored. There has been a massive revival of interest in her works. Last year alone, she had several retrospective showings in the Walker Gallery (Liverpool), the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, the Museum of Modern Art PS1 (New York), and the Museum of Ontario.

Abad created over 5,000 artworks during her lifetime, shaped by her travels and her commitment to amplifying marginalized voices. Her archives have recently been donated to Stanford University and were exhibited as 'Pacita Abad Archives' at Stanford Libraries this summer (2025).

Closer home, we will be able to enjoy these mesmerizing works at STPI. The Pacita Abad exhibition will run from October 25 to 13 December 2025. Don't miss it.

ROOPA DEWAN, a docent at STPI, Gillman Barracks and National Gallery Singapore loves to read, travel and share her passion for art.

INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE CELEBRATES ITS 10TH ANNIVERSARY

ABHA KAUL REPORTS ON NEWLY LAUNCHED THEMATIC TOURS

All photos are courtesy of the Indian Heritage Centre.

This has been a big year for celebrations in Singapore. As the country commemorates six decades of nationhood, one of our small museums also marks a memorable milestone this year. The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) opened to much anticipation in the year of Singapore's 50th birthday and turned ten in 2025.

The years have swiftly passed by, punctuated by several successful special exhibitions organised by IHC but this year something new was introduced to celebrate IHC's 10th anniversary. Novel for both visitors and docents, a programme for themed tours was launched this past June. Conceived and curated by IHC docents with expertise, imagination and passion, these fresh, new tours are offered every Friday at 2:00 pm until December. They provide perfect opportunities to immerse visitors into myriad aspects of the broader IHC story, notably, contact between South Asia and Southeast Asia and more particularly, contributions of Indians in Singapore.

Thematic tours are marvellously different and innovative – they maintain IHC's narrative across its five permanent galleries, but each Friday a docent focuses on a single artwork or a specific set of artefacts, leading visitors to dive deeply into the rich history and heritage of diverse Indian communities, cultures and customs represented at IHC.

Tan Siew Ngoh's tour closely looks at 'A Passage to Little India', a monumental 14-metre painting commissioned for IHC's first special exhibition, *Once Upon A Time in Little India*, in 2016. The tour draws attention to the work's 130 painted panels, a colourful collage comprising over 300 real individuals, traditional trades and historic events.

I delve into the Parsis of Singapore, a tiny Indian community not as well-known as the Tamils or Sikhs, but one that thrived among the earliest merchants and entrepreneurs here in the early 19th century. My tour highlights this unique group's origins in western India, its ancient faith still practised, its rare material culture, philanthropy and the influential role Parsis played in trade and business, including with China.



Tan Siew Ngoh captivates visitors at Passage to Little India.



The author highlights the contributions of the Parsi community on her tour.

Performing Arts is Vidhya Nair's theme, from the beginning of Indian classical arts in temples to poetry and songs praising main deities. The tour covers the spread of Indian arts to Southeast Asia via India's great epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. She discusses classical and folk dance forms, their costumes and jewellery, music orchestra, dance in film, musical instruments, prominent artists and musicians.



Vidhya Nair is pictured with guests on her performing arts themed tour.

Do stop by IHC some Friday at 2:00 pm, if you haven't already – dedicated docents have many exciting tours prepared. No prior registration is needed; simply attend and be awed!

ABHA KAUL has been an enthusiastic FOM docent since 2009. She guides at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Indian Heritage Centre and soon-to-reopen Malay Heritage Centre.

CELEBRATING JO WRIGHT

TALIA WEBB EXPLORES JO WRIGHT'S JOURNEY FROM DOCENT TO PUBLIC SERVICE MEDAL RECIPIENT

As part of the 2025 National Day awards Jo Wright, a long-time volunteer docent with FOM, has been honoured with the Public Service Medal (Friend of Singapore) (*Pingat Bakti Masyarakat*), a national honour recognising individuals who have rendered invaluable service to society. Jo's award is a testament to her sixteen years of dedicated service, leadership, and generosity in sharing her love of art, history and culture with the public.



Jo wearing her home-made Manilla Galleon hat at the Manila Galleon *exhibition in ACM. Images courtesy of Jo Wright.*

Since joining FOM, Jo has been an indispensable presence at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). In the past sixteen years, Jo has dedicated her time and energy as a docent, conducting nearly 900 tours and enthralling more than 11,000 visitors.

Her contributions extend far beyond leading tours. Jo has been an active member of the ACM docent committee, serving on multiple training teams, playing a key role in preparing new generations of docents. Training is a cornerstone of the docent programme: new guides rely on the support and mentoring of experienced volunteers to build confidence and knowledge.

I first met Jo nine years ago when I began my FOM journey as a volunteer docent at ACM. Like my fellow trainees we were in awe of Jo's energy and captivated by her presentations. One day I couldn't believe my luck – I was going to shadow one of Jo's highlight tours. I quickly discovered that Jo liked trainees to dive straight into guiding, putting me in the spotlight and asking me to present an artefact in the Khoo Teck Puat Gallery (Tang Shipwreck Gallery). It was a sink-or-swim attitude, much like one her other great love, the smooth coated otters of Singapore might employ with their pups.

Her impact has extended far beyond the museum floor. Jo has held several key leadership roles within the docent community, each one leaving a lasting mark. As Docent Scheduler, she revolutionised the sign-up procedure, making it more efficient and user-friendly. It was during this time that she coined her memorable catch phrase: "We count every visitor as every visitor counts." Another great quote by Jo is, "Double the fun and half the work", which she would bellow out during special exhibition trainings to motivate fellow docents to sign up to guide in pairs, taking away some of the stress of learning a new tour routine in a short period of time.

Other roles Jo has held at ACM are IT Coordinator and Head of Student Guiding, where her boundless energy, storytelling and infectious smile made the museum a place of wonder for younger audiences. Most recently, she worked as Docent Co-Coordinator, where her collaborative spirit and organisational skills strengthened the docent programme as a whole. Through these many roles, Jo has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to service, adaptability in leadership, and a keen sense of innovation. Her colleagues admire her not only for her professional contributions but also for her warmth, humour, and ability to bring people together.

The Public Service Medal (Friend of Singapore) is a fitting recognition of Jo Wright's extraordinary contributions. Her work has enriched the museum community and touched the lives of countless visitors and fellow docents. In celebrating Jo's achievements, we also celebrate the vital role that volunteers play in nurturing Singapore's cultural landscape and connecting people to the rich histories of Asia.



Public Service Medal (Friend of Singapore) bestowed on Jo Wright by the Government of Singapore, in recognition of her contributions. Image courtesy of the Prime Minister's office, Singapore.

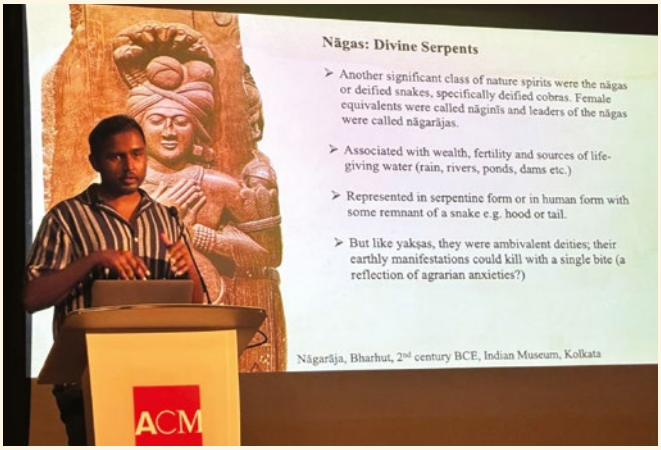
TALIA WEBB is a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Changi Chapel and Museum and the Peranakan Museum.

A RETROSPECTIVE: DR SURESHKUMAR ON SOUTH ASIA'S SACRED HERITAGE

MONDAY MORNING LECTURES (MML) COORDINATORS – **RAMYA AND SONAM** REFLECT ON A TRULY SPECIAL MML OF 2025, WHEN DR SURESHKUMAR CAPTIVATED THE AUDIENCE WITH STORIES OF SOUTH ASIA'S SACRED PAST AND PRESENT

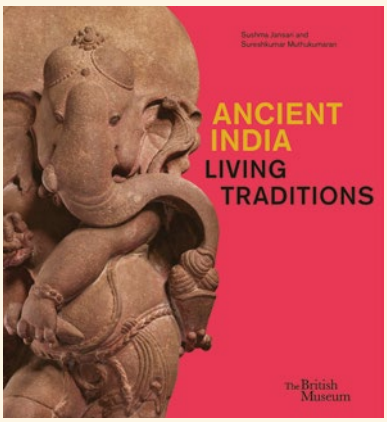
All images were taken by the authors.

For many, Monday mornings are something to look forward to as they gather at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) auditorium for their weekly dose of art, culture and history at the MML. On 24 March, the lecture drew an especially large audience of over 80 attendees. Our speaker was Dr Sureshkumar Muthukumaran, well known to regular MML audiences, and a lecturer in the NUS History Department whose research explores interactions across ancient Afro-Eurasia, with a focus on long-distance connectivity. He treated us to an engaging preview of the exhibition book he co-authored for the British Museum's summer show, *Ancient India: Living Traditions*, which runs until 19 October 2025.



Dr Sureshkumar presenting his slides at the MML.

In a richly illustrated lecture, Dr Sureshkumar traced the enduring significance of nature spirits and deities in South Asian religious traditions, showing how figures such as *Nāgas*, *Yakṣas* and *Yakṣīs* embody the deep interconnections between environment, fertility and faith. Drawing from textual sources, sculpture and living traditions, he highlighted the ways in which these beings have shaped festivals, rituals, and cultural memory from antiquity to the present day.



Jacket cover of Ancient India: Living Traditions *co-authored by Dr Sureshkumar Muthukumaran.*

The lecture began with the *Nāgas*, divine serpents long revered in South Asia. Believed to preside over rivers, ponds, rain and other vital sources of water, they were closely linked to fertility and wealth and thus central to agrarian life. At the same time, their dual nature – both protective and dangerous – mirrored the precariousness of human survival in a world ruled by natural forces.

Dr Sureshkumar also talked about one of the most prominent Indian festivals: Deepawali (Diwali), which is celebrated and recognised as a national holiday in Singapore. While today it honours Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth, early traditions suggest that it may have begun as *Yakṣarātri*, the Night of the *Yakṣas*. The speaker explained that these male and female nature spirits were once the focus of feasting and veneration, and that the festival's enduring connection to wealth and prosperity may reflect these older roots. This re-interpretation invited the audience to reconsider Diwali not only as a celestial celebration but also as one deeply tied to earthbound fertility cults.

Bringing these strands together, Dr Sureshkumar reminded the audience that these figures of nature spirits are more than relics of a distant past. An hour sped by, and we had only begun to uncover the richness of these South Asian traditions. The audience, inspired and curious, was eager to hear how such practices resonate in our own Southeast Asian region. With a smile, Dr Sureshkumar promised a sequel, something for us all to look forward to.

UPCOMING MML

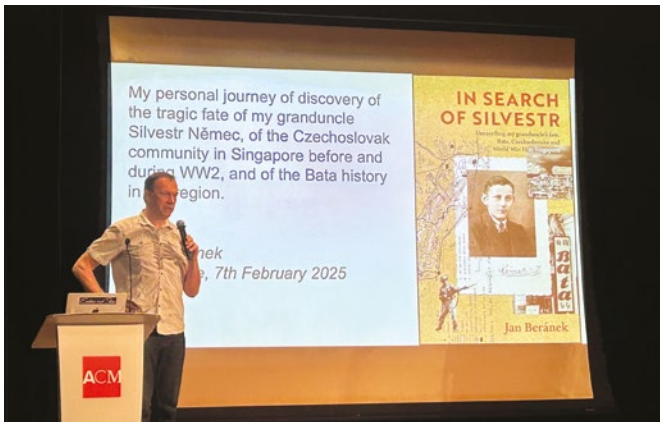
The next Live Monday Morning Lecture will take place on *Monday*, 3 November, 11 am, at the ACM auditorium. We are delighted to welcome Dr. Lin Chia-Tsun, who will present a talk on *New Migrants & Chinese Voluntary Associations*.

RAMYA NARAYANAN and **SONAM KUNDU** serve as the current Coordinators of FOM's Monday Morning Lectures series.

THE STORY OF 125 CZECHOSLOVAKS AND A SHOE COMPANY IN SINGAPORE

ALPANA SINGH AND HARRIET YU HELP PAINT JAN BERANEK'S PICTURE OF BATA SHOE COMPANY LIMITED FROM THE 1930s

You may wonder which one is the longest operating shoe company in Singapore. On the evening of 7 February 2025, Friday with Friends had Jan Beranek as a speaker. He talked about the lives of around 125 Czechoslovaks who lived and worked in Singapore before and during World War II. Many of them were employees of Bata Shoe Company Limited, a familiar brand to many Singaporeans since the start of its operations here in 1931.



Jan Beranek speaks for Friday with Friends. Image courtesy of Larissa Wiegele.

THE BATA SHOE COMPANY LIMITED IN SINGAPORE

Jan spent several years researching the history of Bata Shoe Company Limited in the Far East, focusing on the community of its Czechoslovak employees. His granduncle, Silvestr, was a pedicurist who came to Bata Shoe Company Limited and worked at its Capitol Building flagship store. He went missing during the Japanese invasion in February 1942.

Valuable photos of Jan's granduncle, including ones taken at a Bata Shoe Company employees' outing and of him joining the Singapore Volunteer Corps against a backdrop of old buildings in familiar surroundings, transported the audience back to the 1940s.

THE CZECHOSLOVAKS OF BATA

Using archival documents from several countries, as well as personal diaries and letters gathered from the descendants of the Czechoslovaks, Jan reconstructed their lives: who they were, how they perceived the British colonial regime, what specifics of Bata and the Czechoslovak culture did they bring along and how similar or different these were to the colonial British lifestyle.

Jan also revealed how the events of the war impacted their lives. Besides supporting numerous charities, many of them volunteered for the Singapore Volunteer Corps. A dozen Czechoslovaks participated in the battle at Pasir Panjang Ridge. During the Japanese invasion and years of occupation, no less than ten of them lost their lives, including Jan's granduncle, Silvestr.



The Bata building at North Bridge Road. Image courtesy of Landmark Books.

MEMORABILIA

Alvin Lee, a Singaporean gentleman who collected Bata-made WWII memorabilia, was also present at the event. It was a rare opportunity for the audience to have hands-on experience with Bata-made military equipment including backpack bags, belts and boots.



Jan Beranek and Alvin Lee at the Bata-made WWII memorabilia display. Image courtesy of Larissa Wiegele.

This talk drew the attention of many people, particularly members of the Czech Republic community in Singapore. Madam Michaela Fronkova, the Ambassador to the Czech Republic, was also present for the talk.

Jan Beranek is a director and organisational strategist at Greenpeace International. A Czech ecological activist and energy expert, he is a former member and chairman of Czech Green Party.

The Czech edition of *In Search of Sivestr* (*Pátrání po Silvestrovi*) was published in 2020.

ALPANA SINGH and **HARRIET YU** volunteer as docents at the Asian Civilisations Museum. They are coordinators for the Friday with Friends events as well.

WHAT CONNECTS AN OLD SHOE, SEVERAL RED BALLOONS AND A MICROPHONE?

CLAIRE JONES TALKS ABOUT THE FOM MEMBERS CARE GROUP'S LATEST INITIATIVES

An old car seat, several solitary shoes, lots (and lots!) of plastic, an intact bag of leeks, an old can of paint and a tiny LEGO brick. These are just some of what made up the more than 150-kilogrammes of trash, collected from the beach at East Coast Park, on our beach cleanup, back in July. The Friends of the Museums Members Care (FOMMC) joined One Planet (Singapore) on this project. It was a very hot day, but we were determined (and kept hydrated), and it was so satisfying to see the difference we made to our stretch of sand.



Members of One Planet Singapore and FOMMC on a beach clean-up at East Coast Park, July 2025. Image courtesy of Georgia Mor, One Planet Singapore.

CELEBRATING SG60 AT A LOCAL CHILDREN'S CENTRE

FOMMC volunteers had a fun-filled afternoon in June, with children from the Methodist Welfare Services Care Centre at Geylang East Central. We led activities with SG60-themed artworks and had a blast playing traditional games, such as five stones and pick-up sticks. The balloon volleyball game was the clear favourite!

THE TREBLE MAKERS

We have not neglected our more cultural outreach programme, namely the Treble Makers singing group. On our August visit to St Luke's Senior Care Centre at Telok Blangah, the Treble Makers were joined by The Wings Sunshine Chorale. Led by Florence Wong and accompanied by Chia Chye Teck on the guitar, we entertained the seniors at the centre with songs in Chinese, Hokkien and English, including favourites like *Mo Li Hua*, *Ai Pia Cia Eh Yia* and *Fly Me To The Moon*. The lyrics were projected onto a screen and we encouraged seniors to take part by giving them a microphone to share. And as our visit took place during the SG60 month, we couldn't resist including songs of celebration, like *Singapura, Sunny Island* and *Home*. In March, we visited the Lions Home for the Elders in Bishan with our repertoire of popular favourites across local languages. We are always delighted when more members join our singing group. Please do reach out by email if you would like to get involved!



Members of the Treble Makers at the Lions Home for the Elders in Bishan, March 2025. Image courtesy of Siew Tang.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The beach cleanup and children's centre visit are ways in which FOMMC is seeking to broaden the range of our activities. We are open to suggestions, so please do contact us if you have an idea for a way for us to give back to Singapore (fommemberscare@gmail.com). And keep an eye on the weekly newsletter for more neighbourhood and environmental initiatives in the coming months.

FINISHING ON AN ABSOLUTE HIGH

In April, we were delighted that one of our group, Susan Wong, was awarded her 10-year long service pin at the annual Volunteer Appreciation event. Congratulations and a huge thank you to Susan for ten years of service.

CLAIRE JONES is Joint Co-ordinator of FOMMC. She works as a university academic and loves regional culture, arts and heritage, walking her German Shepherd, and pandan cake.

A STORY IN CLAY

DONNA ABRAHAM TIJO IN CONVERSATION WITH POOJA BHUSARI ABOUT CERAMICS, GLAZES AND ART AT HER STUDIO, KLAY KATHAA

All photos are courtesy of Pooja Bhusari, unless otherwise stated.



Pooja Bhusari at work at Klay Kathaa.

Pooja Bhusari was a software engineer for 15 years before she became a potter. It was in 2015, during a professional stint in Kolkata, that Pooja yielded to her creative calling and decided to pursue a profession in ceramics. These days in Singapore, at her studio, Klay Kathaa, Pooja moulds striking stories through sculptures.

I met Pooja at her studio in Bukit Merah. Over multiple rounds of refreshing white tea, (which she poured from a teapot with a handle she had molded at an unconventional albeit functional angle), she shared details of her artistic journey, sculptures and functional pieces.

YOU MADE A CAREER SWITCH IN YOUR THIRTIES. TELL US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY FROM SOFTWARE TO CERAMICS.

Caught between a mid-level career in software and raising children, I felt something amiss. I wasn't satisfied with the life I had built. The decision to leave a high-paying job for something in the arts wasn't easy. Neither family nor friends understood it. I was fortunate, though, to have the unwavering support of my husband, and I took the leap.

My first brush with pottery began in Delhi, but it wasn't until we moved to Kolkata in 2015 that it became a calling. Kolkata, with its deep-rooted culture of art and literature, became both my muse and my classroom. I had no formal art background, and figuring out where and how to begin was a tough challenge. I was drawn to sculptural works, so I had to be able to draw – something I hadn't done before. I began with learning to draw.

YOUR STUDIO IS CALLED KLAY KATHAA, KATHAA BEING STORY IN HINDI. IN YOUR ART, HOW DO YOU MARRY YOUR INDIAN ROOTS WITH THE SINGAPORE STORY?

When I moved to Singapore, I chose to retain the name Klay Kathaa for my studio (*kathaa* meaning story in Hindi), as a way to stay rooted to my Indian identity, while building new stories here. Like India, Singapore is incredibly diverse, and that richness has influenced my work. My forms often draw from Indian traditions, while my palette carries a Southeast Asian sensibility.

I also believe the language of clay is universal. It transcends geography and culture and allows people from all walks of life to connect through touch, texture and creation. My studio welcomes everyone – Indians, Singaporeans and beyond – through mindful workshops, while also offering artists a calm space to create.



The elephant forms a recurring motif in Pooja's works.

TELL US ABOUT THE ARTISTIC STYLES THAT HAVE INFLUENCED YOUR ART.

I've always been deeply intrigued by the human form, and many of my sculptures draw on childhood memories, layered urban stories and fleeting emotions. Living in Kolkata, surrounded by art, literature, and everyday vibrance, taught me to notice poetry in ordinary life.

Elephants too have become a recurring motif in my work. To me, they embody strength, memory and gentleness.

My work sees clay as a language of stories where human emotions, cultural roots and nature come together in forms that are raw, expressive and deeply personal.



Pooja's signature glaze.

YOU MAKE YOUR OWN GLAZES. HOW DOES THAT GIVE YOU AN EDGE OVER OTHER POTTERS?

A glaze is a mix of chemicals, and a milligram can change a hue by degrees. For me, achieving that desired hue is artistic perfection. By developing my own glazes, my work gains a depth and character that sets it apart. Over time, this has helped me develop a signature style. It gives me immense satisfaction to see that people now recognise my work from its colour, finish and feel.

IN YOUR STUDIO I WAS MET BY AN ARRAY OF ART PIECES: FUNCTIONAL WORKS, SCULPTURES, RELIEF WORKS AND MORE. WHAT CAN A VISITOR EXPECT AT KLAY KATHAA?

At Klay Kathaa, visitors can explore artisanal tableware, under the brand name of Unalome. They can also pick up sculptures, relief works and decorative pieces I've made with care and creativity. I also offer workshops for beginners, experienced potters and kids too. Plus, the studio offers a calm space for anyone to create with clay, making it a place to both admire and experience clay first-hand.

DISTINCTIVE PIECES OF ART IN THE MAKING STAND ON YOUR WORKTABLE. TELL US ABOUT YOUR CURRENT PROJECT.

I've been developing ideas for a new series, *We (The Anomaly)*. In a world increasingly dominated by technology, conflict and broken trust, do we become casualties, or do we persist as anomalies? *We (The Anomaly)* is both a reckoning and a celebration – a reckoning with the precariousness of our condition, and a celebration of the fragile, imperfect humanity that endures despite it all.



Artisanal tableware from the Unalome collection at Klay Kathaa.

One of the pieces from this series, *We (The Anomaly) – 1*, offers a poignant glimpse into the human spirit. Serene human faces emerge from the surface of a fractured concrete block. The contrast between the harshness of concrete and the softness of the faces reflects the quiet strength and enduring presence of humanity.

Meeting Pooja Bhusari was inspirational for me. I returned home enriched by this experience, with a newfound appreciation for art, more specifically pottery.



We (The Anomaly) – 1, *sculpture from Pooja's latest series.*

DONNA ABRAHAM TIJO is an FOM docent at the Indian Heritage Centre.

STILL DAZZLING AFTER OVER A CENTURY AND A HALF

AZRA MOIZ EXPLORES HOW "A POCKET FULL OF GEMS" CREATED A LEGACY THAT HAS ENDURED FOR OVER 150 YEARS

All photographs courtesy of B.P. de Silva.

When Balage Porolis (B.P.) de Silva first arrived in Singapore in late 1860s with a pocket full of gems from his native Ceylon, what would he have encountered? A rough and tumble port town aspiring to be a trading powerhouse, ships of all sizes bringing diverse peoples to its shores, a multi-cultural local and immigrant population, kampongs, shantytowns and shophouses amid mansions, great wealth living alongside grinding poverty?



B.P. de Silva's elegant flagship boutique at Dempsey exudes an inviting warmth. It is not just jewellery that is on display, but also the heritage of its founding family that has created a 153-year legacy.



High Street diamond earrings with old mine cut in a lattice pattern pay homage to B.P. de Silva's first shophouse on High Street dating back to 1872. High Street was once the most fashionable shopping road in Singapore.

B.P. de Silva stayed in Singapore and set up a jewellery business in 1872, catering to the affluent clientele of this region. Five generations and 153 years later, his name stands out as one of the oldest family businesses in Singapore and as a luxury brand of fine jewellery.

A BRAND BASED ON HERITAGE

The distinctive feature that makes B.P. de Silva stand out from other jewellers is its brand. Synonymous with deep historical roots and a rich family heritage that extends over one and a half centuries, its brand is a unique differentiator from any other jewellery brand.

Shanya Amarasuriya, a fifth generation descendent of its founder, reflects on its long and deep heritage, "We have a legacy of over a century and a half in a country that has just celebrated 60 years of independence." This heritage has been a part of Singapore's own history – the legacy of its founder and the experiences of later generations that have enriched B.P. de Silva's brand.

This unique feature appeals to discerning clients who appreciate both its gem expertise and its long heritage. Having curated sapphires for five generations in Singapore, B.P. de Silva has a vast storehouse of gems and an in-house design tradition that appeals to wealthy Asian clients who value its gem expertise and bespoke design service.



Fabulous 9-carat royal blue natural cushion-cut Sri Lankan sapphire set in an Art Deco-inspired design. This was specially created by B.P. de Silva for the National Museum of Singapore's fund-raising gala which took place in August 2025.

ART DECO INSPIRATONS

Shanya Amarasuriya, Creative Director of B.P. de Silva, studied jewellery design in New York City in 2015, and was inspired by its Art Deco architecture – especially the striking Chrysler Building, considered one of the great Art Deco masterpieces and described by the architect Le Corbusier as "hot jazz in stone and steel".

Architectural inspirations from Singapore also made an impact on Shanya, especially the graceful and expressive curves of Tiong Bahru's distinctive Art Deco buildings.

This led to B.P. de Silva designing a range of Art Deco-inspired jewellery that is bold and exciting, appealing to a modern and contemporary aesthetic and a new generation of customers.



Rings from the Jazz Age collection inspired by Art Deco, a signature for the brand.

The stylish geometry and symmetry of Art Deco, despite being already a hundred years old, has a timeless appeal not just in architecture, art and fashion, but also in jewellery design.

SUSTAINABILITY AND ETHICAL PRACTICES

In an era where sustainability and ethical practices are significant, B.P. de Silva is making pioneering moves to bring transparency and accountability to its jewellery business. This started with a pilot in 2020 to introduce traceability of gemstones – it involves keeping track of the mine from which a gemstone originates, up to the polishing and setting of the gem. The full supply chain of a jewellery item then becomes transparent to a customer, who is able to see the end-to-end journey of their purchase. Sourcing gemstones direct from mines enables intermediaries to be bypassed and delivers more value direct to the miners, which has the effect of supporting fair wages and minimising exploitation.

B.P. de Silva is also sourcing more 'Fairmined Gold', a certification that promotes responsible standards in gold mining and sourcing practices. Gold is sourced from small and artisanal miners with fair payments, leading to greater empowerment for miners in poorer areas, improved worker safety, health and environmental protection. B.P. de Silva is aiming to use Fairmined Gold in all its jewellery by 2030.

Integrating ethical and sustainable practices into the business has enabled B.P. de Silva to achieve the lauded 'B Corp' certification in 2022 – this signifies leadership with the highest standards of social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability.



Deco Pop designs, with its offering of colourful gemstones appeal to a modern, contemporary aesthetic.

SUSTAINING ITS SPARKLE WITH LEGACY AND LONGEVITY

The legacy and longevity of B.P. de Silva is based on the preservation of a family business through values of integrity and responsibility, alongside its expertise in gems and jewellery design. The fifth generation of B.P. de Silva that currently stewards the family business are mindful of being guardians of a precious heritage, which they intend to nurture and sustain for future generations. This also resonates with customers, who are conscious that they are buying into a heritage that will endure for generations to come.

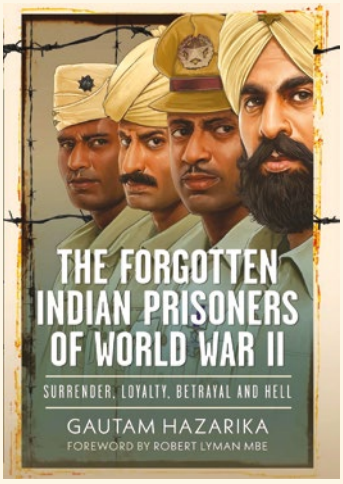
AZRA MOIZ is an NMS docent, organises Study Tours, and has a penchant for shiny gems.

THE FORGOTTEN INDIAN PRISONERS OF WORLD WAR II IN SINGAPORE

GAUTAM HAZARIKA EXPLORES HOW THE INDIAN PRISONERS SURVIVED HELL UNDER THE JAPANESE

All images are courtesy of the author.

My life changed in July 2022 when I acquired a manuscript made in Changi prison during the war in 1942. The authors were civilian internees about whom I knew nothing, and within the pages, I discovered their world. So after having lived in Singapore for 20 years, I finally started exploring similar aspects of the island's World War II history.



I found that half the troops of the British empire defending Singapore were Indian, and beyond the more well-known Indian National Army (INA) of Subhas Chandra Bose, there was so much more that happened to them. Their whole story is what my book is about.

The quest began when I was told that the Japanese had sent Indian Prisoners of War (POWs) from Singapore to labour in the islands in the Pacific. I was astounded to find that in Papua New Guinea, they experienced their equivalent of The Bridge On the River Kwai, Sandakan death march and hell-ships. Tracing their journey backwards, the archives spoke of their earlier presence in Singapore. Put together, it was an almost complete narrative of their wartime life.

I found the story very compelling and fortunately, my publishers, Penguin India and Pen & Sword UK, agreed. This helped in pushing me forward immensely. There were many challenges on the way, all cleared by help from authors, historians and, most, of all POW family members who spoke about their relative's post-war life and how they reacted to it.

Putting it all together, the book begins in 1942 Singapore. It is the story of Captain Mohan Singh of the14th Punjab Regiment, the first commander of the INA supported by Japan to expel the British from India. It is a story of soldiers who found it either a great attraction or an impossible dilemma. Of the great risk Singh took in breaking with the Japanese when he realised they were not honouring their promises. Of Subhas Chandra Bose's tryst with destiny when



he was called to take over the mantle. Of the thousands of INA men who died of sickness and starvation in Burma. Of those who fought bravely when they got a chance. Of how they won the hearts of the people of India despite losing the battle, and how it hastened India's independence.

It is the story of Lieutenant Pillai's daring escape from Singapore. Of Warrant Officer, John Baptist Crasta, one of 17,000 Indian POWs sent to Papua New Guinea, of whom over 10,000 died. Of the war crime trials held by the Australians for Japanese atrocities against these POWs where Subedar Chint Singh was a key witness. Finally, it is the story of wives waiting for five years with little news of their soldier husbands.

These brave men and women deserve commemoration, and I am so happy that FOM and *PASSAGE* are helping to do this.

GAUTAM HAZARIKA is a newly minted FOM Member. After being a banker most of his life, Gautam now researches World War II in Southeast Asia. His focus is on lesser-known stories such as the Indian army, the anti-Japanese resistance and war crimes trials. This is his first book.

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Sopheap Pich, *Delta*, 2007. *Trees of Life – Knowledge in Material*, 2018. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

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Ong Kian Peng, *Natural Radio Workshop*, 2024. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

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Manish Nai, *Untitled*, 2018. *Trees of Life – Knowledge in Material*, 2018. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

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