

# PASSAGE

Friends of the Museums Singapore

March / April 2021



art  
history  
culture  
people

# President's Letter

Dear Friends,

It is hard to believe that it has been a year since the Circuit Breaker, when we changed the way we live and work. The good news is that the vaccines are being rolled out and now we just have to wait our turn. Singapore entered Phase Three on 28 December, allowing social gatherings of up to eight people. In keeping with the new easing of restrictions, FOM has also raised the group capacity from five to eight visitors for our docent-led tours.

FOM's docent training has resumed with the *Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails* docent training, which started on 22 February. If you are interested in learning more about our upcoming docent training sessions and the opportunity to guide at Singapore's museums, I invite you to join the FOM Public Information Meeting (PIM). It will be held via Zoom on 23 March at 10:00 am. This year we intend to follow a hybrid model of online and in-person training. We are very mindful of the safety of our volunteers and trainees and hope to make this a safe and rewarding experience for all involved. For more information and to sign up for the PIM, please visit our website at [www.fom.sg](http://www.fom.sg)

If you are looking for something to do on a Tuesday or Thursday afternoon, now is the perfect time to visit the National Museum of Singapore. You will hear stories from the collective memories of Singaporeans, from early nation-building days to more recent events, when you take a docent-led tour of the special exhibition titled *Home, Truly: Growing Up with Singapore, 1950s to the Present*. Most of the other museums and institutions are also offering docent-led tours, but be sure to check the FOM website for tour times and availability ahead of time.

FOM members have been participating enthusiastically in the events organised by the *FOM Members Care* activity group led by Darlene Kasten. The *FOM Walk for Rice*, held in partnership with NTUC FairPrice on 5 December 2020, saw 94 participants walking 641 kilometres. This effort garnered donations of 2,137 bowls of white rice, 2,137 bowls of brown rice and 2,137 bowls of oatmeal from FairPrice for beneficiaries in Singapore's southeast district. During the *FOM-3M Moves Exercise Challenge*, held from 4 September to 4 November 2020, FOM members exercised for 275,720 minutes to raise \$99,259.20 worth of 3M cleaning products for needy families.

Our members will also help collect valuable information about dragonflies in the *NParks Dragonfly Watch* on 6 March and will participate in the *One Million Trees Movement* tree planting exercise on 12 March. Read more about these efforts and how to join future events in the article on page 26.

The March-April issue of *PASSAGE* magazine usually focuses on FOM study tours. However, with all overseas tours on hold since 2020, the theme for this issue of *PASSAGE* is the colour blue. Many of the articles have been contributed by the ACM's study group participants. Their in-depth research on artefacts that fit the blue theme forms the basis of this issue. I hope you enjoy this edition of *PASSAGE*, which also introduces the organisation's current council members on page 30.

Volunteering is a choice we make, one that enriches our lives as much as the causes we contribute towards. FOM volunteers have been making a difference in Singapore since 1978 and I look forward to celebrating our volunteers at the Volunteer Appreciation Morning on 11 April. A big thank you for all your efforts. You make the world a better place.

Please stay safe and stay healthy.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Garima". The signature is stylized and includes a small flourish at the end.

Garima G Lalwani  
FOM President 2021



## PASSAGE

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President's Letter

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**On the Cover:** The herb *Orthosiphon aristatus*, commonly known as Cat's Whiskers, growing on the riverside opposite Clarke Quay, photo by Alexandra Domart.

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

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

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

For more information about FOM, visit our website [www.fom.sg](http://www.fom.sg) or contact the FOM office.

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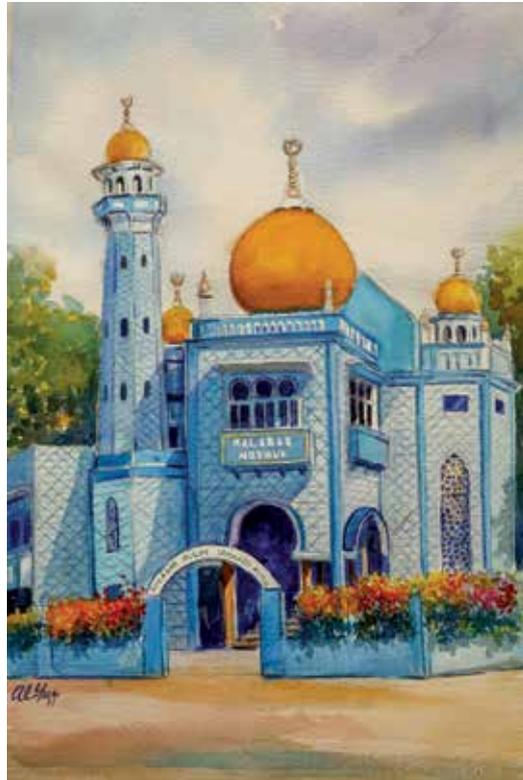
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FOM is not responsible for statements expressed in the signed articles and interviews.

# Shades of Blue in Singapore

By Yusoff Abdul Latiff



While Istanbul has the famous Blue Mosque, Singapore has its own blue mosque – the Malabar Mosque – at the corner of Victoria Street and Jalan Sultan. Whereas Istanbul's mosque boasts magnificent blue tiles inside, Singapore's is adorned with lapis lazuli blue, as well as white, mosaic tiles on the outside. The exception to this colour palette is the mosque's onion-shaped domes, which are covered in glittering golden mosaic tiles. Built in 1963 by southern India's Malabar Muslims, who settled here as textile and jewellery traders, the mosque's administrators decided to clad it with mosaic tiles much later. They did this in order to avoid the recurring cost of painting. The work was finally completed in 1995.

Gazetted as a conserved building by the URA in 2014, the mosque can accommodate 1,000 congregants. It is currently undergoing renovation and a three-storey annex is being added. This will have classrooms, a conference room, lifts and a heritage gallery. The mosque's extension works required the exhumation of 10 to 15 unidentified Indian Muslim graves. Stretching to both sides of Jalan Kubor, the area behind the mosque contains Singapore's oldest Muslim cemetery. This began as three distinct plots: one reserved for Indian Muslims (the one nearest to the mosque); a neighbouring plot for the sultan's descendants; and a Malay burial ground donated by Syed Omar Aljunied as *waqf* (a charitable endowment), with Madrasah Aljunied on the mosque's Victoria Lane side.

Just as exploration of Bukit Brown Cemetery brought to light the graves of the Chinese pioneers who had contributed to Singapore's development, an exploration of Jalan Kubor Cemetery uncovered the graves of prominent Muslims in Singapore's early history. Among the historical figures buried here are: Tengku Hussain Ali, the great grandson of Sultan Hussain; Tengku Kadir, a former Justice of the Peace (JP); Syed Alwee Ali Aljunied, former JP; Haji Ambok Solok, a prominent Bugis businessman and community leader; Haji Osman Naim, a Banjarese merchant; and Kunji Koya Thangal, a prominent Malabar community leader. It seems that Ngah Ibrahim, who was implicated in the assassination of J W W Birch in 1875, was also buried here, but his remains were exhumed and returned to Perak for a hero's burial. Before the land for the mosque's annex was completely cleared, Dr Imran Tajudeen, historian and lecturer in architecture at NUS, was commissioned by the National Heritage Board to document this historical site.

In 1987 the cemetery's entire plot of land was acquired by the government and the Singapore Land Authority cleared most of the Jalan Kubor side of the cemetery. In 1998, the URA zoned it for residential development. I sincerely hope that no condominium or Housing and Development Board block will be constructed here, bearing in mind that this area is part of the charming Kampong Gelam conservation area. Ideally, any development near this iconic blue mosque should blend in with the area's character.



There are more than 120 banks in Singapore and five major ones are locally owned, with two ranked among the world's top banks. DBS, the largest bank in Southeast Asia, was voted the 'Best Bank in the World' in 2020 by *Global Finance* magazine.

Traditionally the banking and financial institutions in the CBD are clustered around Raffles Place and Battery Road, forming a backdrop for the Fullerton Hotel. Each of the towers seems to be reaching skywards like a rainforest's gigantic trees racing upwards to catch the light. Except for the two cream-coloured UOB towers, the greyish One Raffles Place and the whitish-grey Bank of China (on the right side of the sketch), all the other towers come in various shades of blue, including the Maybank Tower, HSBC, Bank of America at OUE, the commercial NTUC Tower and the residential tower, The Sail @ Marina Bay. The location of the financial institutions has overflowed into the Marina Bay area with the Marina Bay Financial Towers 1, 2, 3 and 4 (all blue) housing financial giants such as DBS and the Chartered Bank. Even the commercial and residential Marina One and Asia Square towers are blue.

It appears to be the current trend for architects to drape their skyscrapers in blue, especially blue glass. The colour is considered cool, bringing calmness and tranquillity, like the blue of the ocean. The more traditional and neutral grey is rather boring and architects appear to shy away from using dramatic colours such as bronze and brown. So blue is a safe and favoured colour, even therapeutic, in the sense that it is relaxing and might reduce blood pressure and pulse rates amidst the hectic rush of life deep in the city's commercial centre.



Cast away your morning blues; take a pre-dawn stroll along the Singapore River and wait for the unfolding moment. At the break of dawn, the first rays of sunlight illuminate the roofs of these shophouses, creating a serene and misty, albeit rather gloomy atmosphere for quite a while. Savour it while you can before the riverside's usual hustle and bustle begins.

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

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# Christian Art: Visualising Salvation

By Caroline Carfantan

When visiting the Christian Art gallery, have you ever noticed that all polychrome versions of the Virgin have something in common? Regardless of where they were made, whether a statue, painting or batik baby carrier, Mary is wearing a blue coat. However, although there are many references to fabrics and clothes in the Bible, there is hardly any mention of their colours. From antiquity to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the colour system was tripolar: white, black and red were the basic colours for all social and religious codes.

Blue held even less value than green, the colour of vegetation and death. According to art historian Michel Pastoureau, "Blue was essentially absent from Christian worship during the thousand years preceding the creation of blue stained-glass in the 12<sup>th</sup> century". Before that period, there are only a few examples in early Christian mosaics and Carolingian (780-900 CE) illuminations.

At the same time as blue became more prominent as the colour for the divine and the heavens, so did the Marian cult. Artists started to represent the mother of Christ and by extension of all men, wearing blue instead of dark-coloured garments, as a symbol of her grief over her son's crucifixion. From the time of Charlemagne (747-814), kings were *gratia Dei rex* (King by the grace of God). In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Louis IX of France was the first king to be depicted with a blue robe, clearly visualising his political and religious legitimacy to be on the throne.

So in this 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese shrine, with its painting of the Holy Family and John the Baptist, it is not surprising that Mary's coat is blue. At first glance, one sees the picture of a tender family moment revolving around a sleeping child. However, everything in the composition is highly codified, following the canons of the Catholic church. Nothing is left to the artist's imagination. This pictorial theology portrays not only the Christ as an infant who, like any baby, is helpless and dependent on human love, meaning his followers' love, but is also Christ the Saviour, the child born to die in atonement for our sins.

The red garments of Mary and Joseph are the insignia of their temporal royalty. Red also symbolizes the human nature of the Virgin. She may be the mother of God, but this does not make her a goddess. Joseph is relegated to the background and has to look over Mary's shoulder to see the baby. He may be her humble husband, but he is not the father of the child who is resting on white sheets, symbolizing his purity.

Like a queen, Mary wears a crown encircled by an aura of light. For the Christian onlooker, this golden halo



A 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese shrine, at the Asian Civilisations Museum

identifies her as a holy person. The artist may have based his composition on Revelation 12:1, "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars". Interpretations of this verse may vary slightly, but the general consensus is that the woman being clothed with the sun is the sanctified Virgin, shining because of union with Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. The crown with 12 stars is seen as an emblem of the twelve apostles or as the twelve tribes of Israel.

While Mary and Joseph look tenderly at the sleeping baby, the little boy on the right has eye contact with the beholder and raises his finger to his lips as a warning not to wake the baby. He is Jesus's cousin, Saint John the Baptist, and holds a cross which alludes to the Passion. The inscription on the scroll reads, *Ecce Agnus Dei*, the words he utters when referring to Christ as the saviour, in St John's Gospel (1: 29): *mundi Ecce Agnus Dei, qui tollit peccata* (Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world). This painting of the sleeping infant Jesus is not just a picture of the Holy Family, it is the visualisation of man's salvation through Christ's death.

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**Caroline Carfantan** is an FOM docent with an appreciation for details in visual art. She recently discovered that many European paintings depict so much more than meets the eye. They are a melange of fascinating clues, which if overlooked, elude interpretation.

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Photo by Patricia Bjaaland Welch

# Vietnamese Women's Museum Adapts to the COVID-19 Pandemic

By the staff of the Vietnamese Women's Museum

The Vietnamese Women's Museum (VWM) was established in 1987 and is run by the Vietnam Women's Union. It is a gender museum that is devoted to the research, preservation and display of objects presenting the historical and cultural heritage of Vietnamese women and the Vietnam Women's Union. It is also a centre for cultural exchange between Vietnamese and international women to promote equality, development and peace.

The museum's permanent exhibitions focus on a variety of themes, including Women in Family, Women in History and Women's Fashion. They reflect the lives of Vietnamese women from the past to the present and highlight the roles of Vietnamese women in family, history and society. A special exhibition titled *Worshipping Mother Goddess: Pure Heart – Beauty – Joy* introduces a truly Vietnamese spiritual belief.

In addition to regular exhibitions, VWM also organises many special, thematic exhibitions that reflect the development of and changes in contemporary society, particularly those that impact vulnerable women and disadvantaged children. The VWM continues to diversify its educational activities and public programmes and expand its communication activities to reach a wider public. With continual efforts to improve content, quality and reputation, the Women's Museum aims to provide Vietnamese and international visitors with special and rewarding experiences.

## What the museum has done to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic has made it difficult for visitors from around the world to visit Vietnam and the VWM. Therefore, the museum has diversified its activities to adapt to the situation, adopting the motto: When visitors cannot come to the museum, we bring the museum to their homes.

The VWM has shifted focus to online platforms as a means of connecting with domestic and international visitors. The first project was upgrading the museum's website. The museum also produced a series of five video clips on YouTube to tell stories behind the museum's artefacts and introduce the history and culture of Vietnamese women to viewers of different demographics. ([www.youtube.com/channel/UCFMmp2aJHtUX8962Xe7ShJQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFMmp2aJHtUX8962Xe7ShJQ))

One of the highlights of the museum's activities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic was the production of the documentary *Making Our Place*. The documentary was produced as part of the TRYSPLACE Hanoi Project – a research project about public space in Hanoi. The documentary helps raise awareness about building a safe city for women and young girls. It was selected and screened at the World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi, organised by UN-Habitat and was shown at the 2020 Better City Film Festival in Detroit (USA). It won the prize for the Best Next Gen Film at the Better Cities Film Festival Awards. This recognition was an honour for the museum and an opportunity to promote the museum and its activities to international audiences. ([www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=making+our+place+vietnam+women%27s+museum](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=making+our+place+vietnam+women%27s+museum))

Because of the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for traditional exhibition activities, the VWM created and launched three online exhibitions on its new website to share

information about the history and legacies of Vietnamese women with a wide range of audiences. The exhibitions help educate younger generations about patriotism and pride through content and images carefully designed and edited by VWM's curators.



<https://baotangphunu.org.vn/en/the-general-with-the-khan-ran/> Tells the story of Nguyen Thi Dinh, who rose through the ranks of the Long-Haired Army to become the first female general



<https://baotangphunu.org.vn/en/the-hearts-for-peace/> International women's organisations marched in the streets of world capitals to bring awareness to the war in Vietnam and to petition for peace



<https://baotangphunu.org.vn/the-future-i-want/> Displays stunning photos of everyday life

All the staff at the museum are dedicated to the promotion of women's rights and are proud to be one of the few museums in the world to honour their sisters.

## Vietnam Women's Museum

36 Ly Thuong Kiet Street  
Hanoi, Vietnam

Open from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm daily

# Blue Birds o

By Rob



Fig 1. Asian Fairy Bluebird



Fig 2. Red-Crowned Barbet



Fig 3. Collared Kingfisher



Fig 4. White-Breasted Kingfisher



Fig 5. Blue-Eared Kingfisher



Fig 6. Common Kingfisher



Fig 7. Blue-Throated Bee-Eater

Commemorated in song by Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and Harold Arlen, the bluebird is always associated with happiness. Why? When humans are 'blue' they are sad, not joyful. I believe it is because the depth, purity and brightness of a blue bird's colour inspires happiness in the observer. Although birds come in every hue, and many of them are beautiful, you do not hear songs from composers about red or green birds.

Blue is special in the world of birds, whether in patches, dots, or complete backs or wings. In Singapore, we have many blue species that can delight your heart when you see them shining in the sun. And many are easy to find and observe.

The first and bluest among our birds is the Asian Fairy Bluebird (Fig 1). A resident of lowland rain forest, it frequents the forest canopy and is hard to see, except when tempted down by fruiting trees in Dairy Farm or MacRitchie. You may be surprised by its rather chunky outline. I always associate 'fairy' with lightweight and transparent, but I do not think you could apply this to the Fairy Bluebird.

In the same forested areas, and sometimes in the same fruiting trees, are barbets. Named for the bristles around their mouths that resemble beards, these birds' repetitive booming call is extremely loud and carries far. The Red-Crowned Barbet (Fig 2) has a variety of primary colours, almost like a children's paint-by-numbers. Despite their bright colours they are hard to spot unless they descend to gather fruit.

We have eight species of kingfisher in Singapore and several of these are most often seen as iridescent blue lightning bolts arrowing away and cackling maniacally. Bluest is the Collared Kingfisher (Fig 3), common throughout Singapore. A reliable place to see them is Pasir Ris Park where they fly between the large trees near the bandstand. The White-Breasted Kingfisher (Fig 4) is almost as blue and is easy to see in the Botanic Gardens near the lakes. The Blue-Eared Kingfisher (Fig 5) is much smaller and inclined to lurk in foliage at Hindhede Quarry or Venus Loop. Another tiny blue kingfisher is the Common Kingfisher (Fig 6), which regularly visits the Lotus Pond at Satay by the Bay during migration.

Another shade of blue is offered by our resident bee-eater, the Blue-Throated Bee-Eater (Fig 7). The pastel shade of turquoise down their throat and breast is quite different from the kingfishers' shiny backs. Common everywhere, the Botanic Gardens and Jurong Eco-Park are good places to spot them chasing dragonflies and butterflies, or even bees! During migration, Blue-Tailed Bee-Eaters (Fig 8) can be seen perching on aerials and wire, zooming out like little blue fighter jets to snatch bees in mid-air and returning to their perches to consume them at leisure. Check out the aerials on blocks surrounding Bishan Park.

# f Singapore

Arnold

That same powdery blue can be seen on the Blue-Winged Leafbird (Fig 9), a resident canopy dweller who, like the Fairy Bluebird, can be tempted down by the mulberries in Dairy Farm. In photographs this bird looks outlandishly coloured, but just try spotting it in the forest canopy! MacRitchie, Old Upper Thompson Road and other forested areas provide opportunities.

A rarer bird offering a different tone of blue is the Mangrove Blue Flycatcher (Fig 10). Not recently seen, given our limited mangroves, it has historically been present in Pulau Ubin. However, Chinese Blue Flycatchers were seen this year, so perhaps as one door closes, another opens.

Staying with flycatchers, the Singapore Bird List also contains the Verditer Flycatcher (Fig 11), a stunning bird. While you are not likely to find this bird by going out and searching, keep an eye open when walking in Dairy Farm during migration season, when it is a possibility. A gorgeous shade of light blue, this bird sparkles in the foliage. In general, flycatchers like to adopt a perch and fly sorties off it to snatch flies from the air before returning. Once spotted, you normally can get a good look.

Finally, the pittas. Engaging and beautiful, pittas are hard to see. They can hide behind a blade of grass, disappear as you poke your head around a tree, and call loudly from right beside you without being visible. They have an idiosyncratic 'bounce' rather than walk, and they almost all have at least a streak of blue. Our two resident species, the Blue-Winged (Fig 12) and Mangrove Pittas, are similarly coloured, but the Mangrove Pitta (Fig 13) has a larger bill, adapted for crunching up clams from around mangrove roots. Both can be found on Pulau Ubin, and migrant Blue-Winged Pittas regularly spend a couple of weeks in the Botanic Gardens or other urban sites in Singapore. A Mangrove Pitta has recently been living in the mangroves at Pasir Ris.

I hope this article inspires you to keep an eye out for blue birds as you visit some of the spots I mentioned. Who knows? I might see you there. I'll be the one humming Cole Porter!

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**Rob Arnold** pursues a lifelong interest in nature and is delighted to be approaching nine years in Singapore and the magical number of 300 bird species he's seen here.

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All photos by the author



Fig 8. Blue-Tailed Bee-Eater



Fig 9. Blue-Winged Leafbird



Fig 10. Mangrove Blue Flycatcher, photo taken in Malaysia



Fig 13. Mangrove Pitta



Fig 12. Blue-Winged Pitta



Fig 11. Verditer Flycatcher, male, photo taken in Malaysia

# Cobalt – the Bluest of Blues

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

What makes Chinese blue-and-white ceramics so attractive? It's that spell-binding combination of cobalt blue on porcelain's pure white base.

## What is Cobalt (Co)?

Cobalt is a bluish-white, lustrous metal found in the earth's crust only in chemically combined form. As a result, pure cobalt has to be extracted by smelting. The process is not without its dangers: the name 'cobalt' comes from the German *kobald*, which means goblin, because arsenic is released during the smelting process.

One form of cobalt known as asbolite is indigenous in China but wasn't discovered for some time. The cobalt first experimented with in China was sourced from West Asia, where it was readily obtainable and had been used as early as 4500 BCE by the Egyptians who used cobalt oxide as a substitute for the much rarer lapis lazuli.

## Early Cobalt in China

According to the curator of the Islamic Collections of the British Museum, "evidence of contact between the Islamic lands and East Asia dates back to at least the first century BCE."<sup>1</sup> Archaeological digs show that cobalt was probably brought by overland routes to China by the fifth century BCE when it was, "used for glass [bead-]making during the Warring States (475-221 BCE) period."<sup>2</sup>

Cobalt's next known appearance in China was during the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), when potters used it very sparingly as a colourant (Fig 1) primarily on ceramics known as 'three-colour' (*sancai*) and tomb wares (*mingqi*). Amongst the potters known for producing *mingqi* were those in Gongxian in Henan province. These potters were simultaneously experimenting with copper oxide to produce the colour green. *Sancai* shards have been found at Mantai in Sri Lanka, Samarra in Iraq and in Fustat (Old Cairo, Egypt).<sup>3</sup>



Fig 1. The famous Tang dynasty phoenix-shaped *sancai* ewer in the Guimet Museum (Paris)

At the same time, the kilns in Gongxian were busy experimenting using coloured pigments (primarily iron oxide) under a transparent glaze. When Chinese potters began experimenting with cobalt, however, the results were disappointing, as you can see for yourself in the ACM's Tang Shipwreck gallery. These pieces are stoneware covered with a slip and decorated with cobalt-blue designs that appear to have melted and run into the clear glaze. Scholars often refer to these early experiments as 'blue-on-white' rather than 'blue-and-white.'

## West Asian attempts to copy Chinese ceramics and vice-versa

The unsuccessful Gongxian potters were probably misled by the samples arriving from West Asia. By the Tang, a significant number of Chinese ceramics (most likely Xing and Ding white stoneware) had arrived in West Asia, primarily as diplomatic gifts, but also in trade, passing through the busy ports of Siraf or Basra. Not possessing the white kaolin or the kiln technology that generated the high temperatures needed for producing stoneware, the local potters of West Asia compensated by creating an opaque white glaze to cover their yellow clay pots, which they then decorated with cobalt blue designs. But while West Asian potters were producing some attractive pieces (Fig 2), potters' attempts back in China, using what they believed was the same methodology as the samples they were shown, were disappointing (Fig 3).<sup>4</sup> It wasn't overnight, but once Chinese potters began to experiment with their raw materials as well as make modifications to their glazing and firing processes, they discovered the successful technique.<sup>5</sup>



Fig 2. A typical ninth century blue-on-an-opaque-white glaze dish, Basra, courtesy of the Kuwait National Museum



Fig 3. Close-up of an early Chinese attempt to imitate West Asian blue-and-white ceramics, salvaged from the Belitung wreck (ca 826 CE)

## The Breakthrough

Until the 1970s, most scholars believed that the breakthrough in China's ability to produce flawless blue-and-white porcelain came in the late Song (960-1279) or early Yuan (1279-1368), but we now know that blue-and-white was made at the Gongxian kiln site in Henan Province as early as the mid-to-late Tang. One successful modification was applying the cobalt *directly onto the unfired porcelain* rather than applying it over the glaze. However, it wasn't until "the early part of the Yuan dynasty that the underglaze blue technique was finally perfected at Jingdezhen ... [when a glaze] that prevented the cobalt from diffusing during firing,

made possible the clear and intricate designs for which early blue-and-white is renowned.”<sup>6</sup>

Both imported and local cobalt were experimented with from the Tang on, but scholars believe “that Yuan blue and white was first made using Chinese cobalt, not imported cobalt.”<sup>7</sup> Imported cobalt had a relatively high percentage of iron-to-manganese and produced a strong brilliant blue, but when accumulated, it produced dark concentrations of specks, an effect known as ‘heaped and piled’ (Fig 4). Local cobalt discovered in Raozhou prefecture in Jiangxi Province<sup>8</sup> not far from Jingdezhen, had a relatively higher percentage of manganese to iron and in comparison, looks “pale and soft”. It is these differentiations that assist archaeologists and collectors to differentiate one from the other.

The flow of West Asian cobalt was interrupted briefly at the end of the Yuan dynasty but was reinstated once the early Ming (1369-1644) had stabilised. During that interim, local cobalt was substituted. It produced paler colours, but the new blue-and-white ceramics were so popular that production continued. When trade resumed under the Ming’s third emperor, Yǒnglè (r 1403-1424) and his grandson the Xuāndé emperor (r 1426-1435), imported cobalt returned to China. The eunuch admiral Zheng He (1405-1433) brought back so much cobalt from his voyages that it kept Jingdezhen well-stocked for several decades, but as that supply began to run out, Chinese potters again began mixing local and imported cobalt in varied proportions dependent on a range of variables, with one reign known for its strong blues and another for its more violet hues. Much depended on the ceramics’ final destination: the imperial court, local consumers or export. However, over time, Chinese potters learned both how to remove their local cobalt’s unwanted impurities to



Giovanni Bellini’s famous painting *Feast of the Gods*, the first western oil painting to feature a Chinese blue-and-white porcelain dish (1514), courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC



Fig 4. A Ming dynasty Xuāndé period (1426-1435) blue-and-white vase showing the ‘heaped and piled’ affect when cobalt accumulates in concentrations in a glaze, courtesy of the British Museum

produce, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a relatively manganese and iron-free cobalt, as well as how to replicate the older combinations that produced very convincing fakes.

For those interested in learning more, a good place to start is the British Museum’s tome on *Ming Ceramics* by Jessica Harrison-Hall (2001) and the chapter on ‘Tang blue-and-white’ in *Shipwrecked* (2011), followed by the references used in this article.



The earliest known dated (1351) Chinese blue-and-white ceramics known as the David Vases date to the Yuan dynasty, but earlier shards that can be dated to the Song dynasty (1127-1279) have been found

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Unless otherwise noted, photos by the author

<sup>1</sup> Ladan Akbarnia & others, *The Islamic World: A History in Objects*. London: The British Museum, 2018, p. 147

<sup>2</sup> Christopher F. Kim, “Early Chinese Lead-Barium Glass: In Production and Use from the Warring States to Han Periods (475 BCE-220 CE)”, Brown University, 2012. <https://www.brown.edu/academics/archaeology/sites/academics-archaeology/files/publication/document/Kim2012.pdf> Accessed 12 September 2020

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Rawson, M. Tite and M. J. Hughes, “The Export of Tang Sancai Wares: Some Recent Research” in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, Vol. 52 (1987-88), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Laboratory testing confirms that “the transparent glazes of Tang tri-colour ceramics and blue-on-white pottery [were both] low-fired lead glazes.” Weidong Li, et al, “A Landmark in the History of Chinese Ceramics: The Invention of Blue-and-white Porcelain in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.)”, *STAR: Science & Technology of Archaeological Research*, 3:2, 358-365, DOI: 10.8 0/20548923.2016.1272310

<sup>5</sup> Porcelain stone was originally “the only raw material used for porcelain bodies, [but with the Yuan dynasty] kaolin, with a high aluminium concentration, started to be added.

<sup>6</sup> S. T. Yeo and Jean Martin, *Chinese Blue & White Ceramics*, Singapore: Arts Orientalis, 1978, p. 24

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Pusheng, “New Discoveries from Recent Research into Chinese Blue and White Porcelain” in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, Vol. 56, 1992-92, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> S J Vainker, *Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, London: British Museum Press, 1991, p. 191

# The Blue Boy of Vrindavan: Venugopala

Exploring Symbols and Meaning in Thanjavur-style Painting of South India

By Avni Rao



Venugopala or 'Krishna playing the flute'. Early 19<sup>th</sup> century from Tamil Nadu, South India. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, 1995-00892

The Hindu god Krishna stands prominently at the centre of this Thanjavur<sup>1</sup> style painting from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. Krishna is worshipped as one of the most important avatars of Vishnu, the preserver and protector god and also in his own right. Why is Vishnu always represented as dark blue like a rain-bearing cloud, *neela-megha-shyama*, or like clear sky, *indranila*?<sup>2</sup> The blue colour symbolizes his infinite and formless

nature and his limitless brilliance, which pervades the universe. Krishna is also almost always depicted with blue skin although the literal meaning of Krishna is black.

Here, Krishna commands attention as he stands prominently at the centre of the composition in an auspicious pose known as *swastika pada*. His deep blue skin is a striking contrast against the vivid red background. His importance is emphasised by his size. He looks directly

at the observer, enabling an essential dialogue between the deity and the worshipper, known as the *darshan*. He is situated within slightly raised architectural elements in low relief, a lobed arch known as a *prabhavali*, embellished with the trademark Thanjavur gilding and gemset technique. This represents the *sthala*, the auspicious place where the deity manifests itself to devotees. The Thanjavur artist has elevated the image from decoration to deity. The use of gold here can be considered part of divine symbolism, for it is as radiant and shining as the gods. The painting becomes one giant ornament.<sup>3</sup>

Krishna is depicted in this popular aspect as Venugopala. *Venu* means flute and *gopala* means cow protector or protector of the world, hinting at his antecedents as a folk deity and his adolescence as a cowherd in the fields of Vrindavan. Holding a flute, he wears his trademark peacock feather crown, a topknot with a head ornament known as *sarpech* and is adorned with beautiful and finely detailed jewellery reminiscent of South Indian dancers. His lower garment, the traditional South Indian style *dhoti*, gleams richly. A garland of forest flowers, *vanamala*, is draped around his neck and falls in a stylised manner on either side. A bejewelled cow with horns of gold licks his feet in adoration, while her newborn calf nurses and the rest of the herd gazes reverently at the Lord.

Krishna looms protectively over the *gopis*<sup>4</sup> standing on either side of him in the traditional attire of 19<sup>th</sup> century Tamil women. Their elaborate jewellery is enhanced by the inset of gemstones, coloured glass and mirrors in typical Thanjavur style. Their stringed musical instruments, a traditional Indian *tanpura* (a large, four-stringed lute) and the Carnatic violin adapted from the West in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, evoke the social and religious Bhakti<sup>5</sup> cult with its emphasis on poetry, music and dance to venerate the deity. Krishna's elder brother Balram is symbolized by the five-hooded serpent or *naga* entwined around the gilded tree because in Vaishnava tradition, Balram is revered as the incarnation of the Sesha *naga*, the king of the serpents on whom Lord Vishnu rests when floating on the ocean of milk while creating the world.

Thanjavur paintings are a unique form of South Indian art characterised by the profuse use of gold leaf and gemstones, a practice that evolved between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries during the Maratha rule of the city of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu. Typically, the religious art of Thanjavur draws its inspiration from a mix of classical art drawn from ancient Indian texts on paintings, folk art and contemporary influences. The artists preserved the art in sketchbooks that contained the iconography and symbolism for each deity. The artworks range in size from large, to ones the size of doorways, commissioned for palaces, temples or religious halls and meant to be viewed from a distance, to smaller portable ones for domestic prayer – the bejewelled and gilded icons “a glowing presence in a darkened room”.<sup>6</sup>

Thanjavur was renamed Tanjore when the British took over the administration of the state in 1799. British paintings of this period were created by Thanjavur artists mainly on paper, without the use of gold leaf and gems. In traditional Thanjavur paintings in the closing decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, inevitably some western influence is discernible. Western shading techniques were adopted to create depth, small

cherubs float in the air, and in larger paintings pillared halls, heavy curtains, elaborate chandeliers with gold fringes and strings of pearls enrich the background.

Thanjavur art incorporates carving, sculpture and jewellery techniques. The base, known as the *wasli*, was traditionally made of jackfruit wood and recycled paper. Cloth pasted to the *wasli* was then primed with several layers of a mixture of white lead, gum, copper sulphate and rice gruel, dried in the sun and burnished with a stone or shell. Charred twigs were traditionally used to sketch the outline on the primed surface, including the details of where the gems were to be inlaid. A sticky putty (gesso) consisting of finely powdered limestone mixed with glue called *sukkan* was applied to the surfaces where the gems and gold were to be applied. The gemstones or coloured glass were then embedded in the *sukkan*, which was raised to create a three-dimensional effect onto which very thinly beaten layers of pure gold leaf or gold-plated silver (which retained its brilliance) were glued. Initially used sparingly, gold and gemstones began to dominate later paintings. The background, painted with vibrant and pure natural mineral pigments or vegetable dyes: ochre for red, chrome for yellow and indigo for the blue, was added last.

The works were rarely signed, perhaps a sign of humility in the Indian tradition. The artists were mainly from the Andhra Telugu-speaking Raju community who migrated to Tamil Nadu after the fall of the Vijaynagar empire in 1565 and were known for their wood craftsmanship. They fashioned temple ornaments, puppets and toys, among other things. In her book, *Tanjavur Painting of the Maratha Period*<sup>3</sup>, Appasamy quotes a British officer, F R Hemingway, who attested to the skill of the artists even if he wasn't enamoured with the art: “Some good painting is done at Tanjore by men of the Raju caste. They paint on wooden tablets or on cloth made beautifully smooth with paste of powder and gum and their drawing is correct and even. But the designs are seemingly confined to the Hindu gods or heroes and the finished pictures are grotesquely adorned with sparkling stones or pieces of metal. Painting and drawing are commoner in this than in other districts. In the large towns, the temple walls and even the walls of private residences are often covered with figures of gods and heroes drawn or painted with considerable skill.”

Many factors contributed to the emergence of Thanjavur art: the Bhakti movement; the dispersion of artistic labour because of war and migration; the influences of traditional, folk and contemporary styles of art; the ability to dispense with the consecration stage where a priest was required to install the bronze deity; perhaps even the scarcity of bronze (all available supplies were used for producing weapons). These gilded and bejewelled paintings became popular votive images. Look afresh at our blue boy of Vrindavan, remembering that the importance of this unique art form lies not just in its aesthetic value but also in its sanctity and symbolism.

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**Avni Rao** is a (newly minted) docent at the ACM and is fascinated by the living traditions of the art and culture of India and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Thanjavur painting’ (the anglicised version is ‘Tanjore’), refers to a style of painting that reached a characteristic form in the town of Thanjavur in the state of Tamil Nadu in Southern India during the Maratha period (17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century)

<sup>2</sup> Rao Sreenivas. *Symbolisms associated with Vishnu Icons*

<sup>3</sup> Appasamy, Jaya. *Tanjavur Painting of the Maratha Period*. Abhinav Publications.

<sup>4</sup> female cowherds

<sup>5</sup> *Bhakti*, (Sanskrit: devotion), a movement in Hinduism which began in South India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It emphasised the mutual intense emotional attachment and love of a devotee toward a personal god and of the god for the devotee.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

# Deepest Indigo – Blue Cloths of the Toba Batak of Sumatra

By Pia Rampal



Fig 1. Ompu Sihol submerges yarn in the indigo dye bath. Image: Harian Boho, 1980, *Legacy in Cloth*

In the Ancestors and Rituals gallery at the ACM, a spectacular shoulder cloth of the Toba Batak in the deepest indigo caught my eye. Blue, the colour of the sky, is one of the most difficult colours to achieve on cloth and is imbued with symbolism. The Toba Batak highly appreciated the very dark, blue-black natural indigo dye, reminiscent of the shades of blue found in their Lake Toba. Unlike other dyes, indigo is the enigmatic dye that needs no mordant to attach it to cotton and is renowned for its magical alchemy. Jenny Balfour-Paul, an authority on indigo, describes its magic, "... there is something very mysterious about a dye that only reveals its colours after yarn or cloth emerges from the dye pot... the slow transformation of yellow into blue takes place as a newly dyed cloth is removed from an indigo dye vat and oxygen turns sorcerer."<sup>1</sup> The Toba Batak dye their yarns using either *Indigofera tinctoria* or *marsdenia tinctoria* depending on what is available. *Marsdenia tinctoria* grows on the banks of Lake Toba and is said to produce a darker colour.

Deep blue textiles are among the earliest types of cloths woven by the Toba Batak of North Sumatra. Life was centred on the mystical blue Lake Toba, formed from a large volcanic crater and reaching a depth of 2,300 feet. Living in the highlands of northern Sumatra, the Batak kept trails and passes garrisoned to keep away unwanted visitors. Aided by their fierce reputation, this forested area of deep valleys was seen as inaccessible, which allowed ancient textile beliefs and techniques to survive. While they kept out European

colonisers and missionaries until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Toba Batak had access to Indian, Chinese and Javanese traditions as well as to the Malay coastal trading centres. According to scholars, Batak textile designs are amongst the most ancient in the archipelago.

To understand the Bataks' relationship with these magnificent blue textiles, Sandra Neissen spent 35 years documenting them and was an invaluable resource. In 1980, Neissen recorded the complex process of indigo production employed by Ompu Sihol (Fig 1) and described each step in her monumental book, *Legacy in Cloth* (Fig 2).<sup>2</sup> First, a substance called indican was extracted from the leaves of the *marsdenia*, which grows on the banks of Lake Toba. The leaves were soaked in water. This soluble compound was converted into an insoluble indigotin by the addition of white lime dissolved in water. After this, she stirred vigorously until the solution changed to a dark blue colour. If this did not happen, the pot was discarded. The pot with dark blue solution was covered with bamboo leaves and thorny branches to keep out the evil eye. The indigotin solution was mixed with ash and water to ferment and change back into a soluble form called indigo-white. She would dye the yarn by submerging it and moving it in and out of the dye pot. When exposed to oxygen, the green yarns would 'magically' turn blue. The yarn was then dried. Ompu Sihol would dip the same yarn into the indigo dye morning and night for two months to create a very deep blue.

The understated, elegant shoulder cloth at the ACM was created by Toba Batak women weavers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, although its design and technique are much older (Fig 3). Typical of cloths woven on backstrap looms, it is rectangular and long, with fringes on both ends. The field of this deep blue, almost blue-black shoulder cloth, is defined by warp stripes in a lighter blue. At each end of the cloth are deep blue twisted fringes. Above the fringe is weft red and yellow twining, an ancient technique done off the loom. While the use of beads in the twining is often seen, the beads at the top of the fringe on this cloth are unusual. These textiles were not mere clothes, but were vital for ritual and gift exchange, helping to maintain the balance of village life and also cosmic equilibrium. This cloth is made from cotton with natural indigo dye, unlike the later use of commercial dyes and yarns which, Mattiebelle Gittenger writes, “robbed the plain textiles of the Batak of their gentle sophistication.”<sup>3</sup>

The Toba Batak word for handwoven textiles is *ulos*. In one of their myths, the earth originates from the spinning expertise of a daughter of an upper world deity. This link between women and textiles is an ancient Batak belief; textiles are woven by women, represent women and as ‘female’ gifts, they are exchanged on ritual occasions. Women with expertise and knowledge are empowered by their status as creators of *ulos*. The relationship between the weaver and the backstrap loom is so connected that her body moving



Fig 3. Shoulder Cloth, Toba Batak, Northern Sumatra, cotton, glass beads, natural dyes, 173x77cm, gift of the city of Delft, ACM, Singapore, 2018-00974. Image courtesy of Nusantara Museum

backwards and forwards becomes as one. As in this deep blue textile, regularity is a key feature of Batak cloths, the weaver of the cloth would have planned the design before buying the yarn. Traditionally, three colours are used for Toba Batak textiles, red, blue-black and white, representing the totality of the universe.

Among the weaver’s repertoire of textiles, the deep blue cloths are amongst the most ancient designs. There are three main variants of blue cloths, the *Sibolang*, *Bolean* and *Surisuri*, each of which is considered important for rituals. According to correspondence with Neissen, these indigo-dyed textiles are indispensable in the social and

ritual life of all the northern Batak groups. While there is design unity among these cloths, the many regional nuances in the details of their design techniques, names and functions suggest that weavers have been experimenting with them for a very long time. Proof of their variety is to be found in Batak closets and chests throughout North Sumatra. In Neissen’s view, the ACM cloth in deepest indigo is a *Bolean*. The Toba meaning for *Bolean* is black wild fowl or pheasant. The cloth is characterised by a narrow, plain blue-black border, with a centre body that is blue-black with light blue or white stripes, a weft border with patterned twining and a twisted fringe. The *Bolean* has major stripes that are wider and there may be three or more narrower stripes in between. It is worn as a shoulder cloth by men and women and in rituals as a shroud for the dead.

In conclusion, the deep blue *ulos* from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century represents a vanishing past. Woven into its yarns are ancient traditions and beliefs. Sadly, the use of natural indigo dyes is declining. In 2013, the Nusantara Museum in Delft had to close and decided to give its artefacts back to Indonesia, the land they had come from. The National Museum in Jakarta accepted 1,500 artefacts. The rest were distributed to museums in the region, including this minimalist textile with sombre beauty gifted to the ACM in 2018. The next time you visit the ACM, remember to look out for this precious gift, a Toba Batak textile in the deepest of indigo, gleaming and beckoning us, just like the night sky.

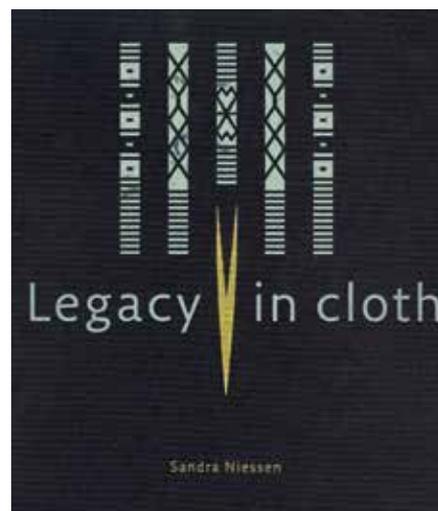


Fig 2. Legacy in Cloth by Sandra Neissen. Image courtesy of Sandra Neissen

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**Pia Rampal** has been an ACM docent for 14 years. In Phase 2, Pia and Abha Kaul created a small in-person study group appropriately named PPE (a Perceptive, Penetrating Eye) looking in depth at ACM artefacts by theme. Our recent theme was ‘Something Blue’ and this textile was Pia’s chosen artefact.

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<sup>1</sup> Balfour-Paul, Jenny, *Indigo, Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*, British Museum, London, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Neissen, Sandra, *Legacy in Cloth: Batak Textiles in Indonesia*, KITLV Press, Netherlands, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Gittenger, Mattiebelle, *Splendid Symbols: Textiles and Tradition in Indonesia*, OUP, 1979

# A Sacred Blue Cloth from Sumatra: ACM's Calligraphic Batik

By Abha Dayal Kaul

A stunning blue batik cloth on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum's Islamic Art gallery invites a closer look. It is an intriguing symbol of the unique synthesis of Islam with existing, local cultural traditions in Southeast Asia, notably Indonesia. Batik, which literally means "cloth painted with tiny dots", is well known as a textile art made famous in the Indonesian archipelago. It has been recognised on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list and is still equated mainly with the classical arts of Java. However, the craft of batik was practised in Sumatra as well, as per studies of local dyestuffs and the wax ingredients employed – it was not simply transplanted from Java.<sup>1</sup>

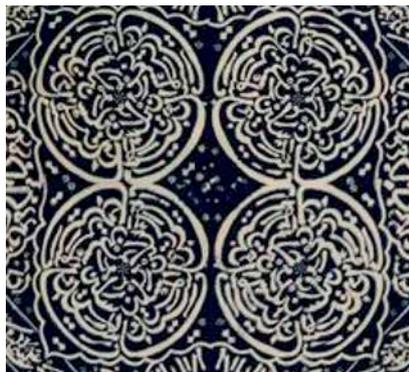
Examples of batik ornamented with Arabic script are found across the Indonesian islands, but the style of what is named *batik basurek* (or 'written' batik) is a tradition of southern Sumatra, which includes Jambi and Bengkulu.<sup>2</sup> The term refers to a textile containing hand-drawn, decorative Arabic letters and is also generally called *batik tulisan Arab* or



Blue Calligraphic Batik, from Jambi, Sumatra, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore

*batik kaligrafi*, since Islamic calligraphy is its main motif. This style developed on the north-eastern coast of Java and also in Sumatra, creating a special type of sacred cloth imbued with talismanic power.

Islam had arrived from overseas and been fully embraced



Four central medallions up close

in Jambi, Sumatra, from where this 100-year-old ACM cloth comes. It reflects a local aesthetic and response to a foreign global religion that came to these parts peacefully, along with traders and spiritual leaders – Arabs, Persians and Indians<sup>3</sup>. Not much information is readily available about the origin of the blue calligraphic batik tradition, or how these pieces were used. Dr Fiona Kerlogue spent months in Jambi doing research, revealing useful facts about such cloths and their context. We now know that these batiks are more Sumatran than Javanese, and some are distinctly Jambi-made, not just exported from Java for use in Sumatra<sup>4</sup>.

The most striking aspect of this Jambi artefact is that the indigo-dyed cotton cloth is completely covered with fine white writing, achieved with a wax pen or *canting*, amidst remarkable, precise arrangements.

What is displayed in the gallery is one square section, but it is a part of a longer, rectangular cloth in which this square pattern is replicated two and a half times.

Batik, as we know, is a laborious method of wax-resist dyeing, where intricate designs are waxed to resist colour intended for the remaining space. A cloth such as this one is an amazing artistic accomplishment, rendered with hot wax and multiple indigo baths in order to obtain arresting white patterns against a deep blue background. In each square, four lotus-like central medallions appear, the same round shape in each corner, then a lobed cartouche placed in each quadrant, containing a curious mirrored pattern that will shortly be revealed.

Four rectangular lozenge-like shapes run from the core across the exposed square cloth, both vertically and horizontally, and countless diagonal lines within concentric diamonds make a series of perfect right angles, almost like mountain peaks. Mirror images abound, suggesting symmetry and balance, imparting the impression of harmony and perhaps indicating the infinity of the universe.

It is the calligraphy, the beautiful, stylised writing in Arabic, that mesmerises the viewer and infuses the cloth with powerful supernatural and protective power. No expert has read the artistic writing on our ACM cloth as yet; it would be gratifying to know exactly what is inscribed within its mysterious lines and shapes.<sup>5</sup> In Indonesia, cursive script in the Persianate *naskh* style rather than the angular *kufic* was favoured for calligraphy on materials other than stone, including on textiles<sup>6</sup>, which is what the writing on the ACM cloth resembles.



The British Museum's square batik head cloth with stylised Arabic writing, from Sumatra

Depending on their shape and size, calligraphic batiks are believed to have been used most commonly as head cloths, Qur'an covers, ceremonial banners and coffin covers. This particular piece, long and rectangular in shape, is likely to have served as a coffin cover. Similar textiles, *basurek* cloths from Jambi, showing Islamic decorative motifs and calligraphic inscriptions, were used as shrouds for the well-respected deceased; they indicate a similar use for this particular batik as well.



The National Gallery of Australia's long batik cloth with Islamic calligraphy, from Java or Sumatra

Talismanic cloths would bear sacred calligraphy, including words of praise to Allah, the profession of faith, and prayers for forgiveness on behalf of the dead.<sup>7</sup> Written verses of the Qur'an are considered the very embodiment of the divine in Islam and have been fundamental to Islamic art everywhere, including in Southeast Asia. At times, less important than the content of the script is the text itself; those unable to read it can still recognise the power and presence of divinity in the inscriptions. The beauty and skill with which the writing is embellished expresses the reverence in which the holy words are held. In this sense, calligraphic motifs served not only as communication but as a symbolic affirmation of faith.<sup>8</sup>

The medallions on the ACM cloth probably contain the *Bismillah*, *Shahada* or other religious or mystical invocations, although it could be challenging even for experts to read the fine print within the narrow lines. While many examples of inscribed cloths and other materials do feature 'pseudo-calligraphy', this is true Arabic script and the cloth's surface appears to have actual text on it<sup>9</sup>.



San Francisco's Asian Art Museum's cloth, Batik Tulis Arab, with patterns similar to the ACM's blue batik

One element clearly legible and recognisable within those lobed cartouches, featuring in four sets of mirrored or interlocking images, is the Arabic letter W or *waw*. It means 'and', so *waw* is a conjunction and symbolizes the connection between God and human beings. The *waws* are calligraphers' favourite letters because of their distinctive hooklike shape. They have been used to decorate various pictorial forms in Islamic calligraphy,



Double 'Ws' or waws in lobed cartouches seem to soar skywards

such as in a boat where all the 'ands' form the oars of the boat of salvation, which carries the faithful to the shores of paradise<sup>10</sup>. The impact of the *waw* is heightened by the art of mirroring and repetition – the double letter on this blue batik highlights the symmetry, geometry and beauty of calligraphic figures and their mystical meaning.

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**Abha Dayal Kaul** is an FOM docent who enjoys research, learning and sharing. She is glad to have studied Arabic during this last year of Covid and thrilled to now recognise a few calligraphic letters and words.

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All photos from the public websites of the respective museums

<sup>1</sup> *Sumatra, Crossroads of Cultures*, KITLV Press, Leiden, 2009 (Essay on Trade and Sumatran Textiles, by Fiona Kerlogue and Wahyu Ernawati, p.166); *Batik Cloths from Jambi, Sumatra*, Fiona Kerlogue, PhD Thesis, University of Hull, 1997

<sup>2</sup> *Conversations with Dr Michael Feener; The History of Besurek Bengkulu Batik*, <https://www.helloindonesia.id/the-history-of-besurek-bengkulu-batik/3220/indonesian/>

<sup>3</sup> *The Message and the Monsoon: Islamic Art of Southeast Asia: from the Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia*, 2005, editor Lucien de Guise; *Sumatra, Crossroads of Cultures*, KITLV Press, Leiden, 2009 (Essay on Trade and Sumatran Textiles, by Fiona Kerlogue and Wahyu Ernawati)

<sup>4</sup> *Batik Cloths from Jambi, Sumatra*, Fiona Kerlogue, PhD Thesis, University of Hull, 1997

<sup>5</sup> *Conversations with ACM curator, Ms. Noora Zulkifli*

<sup>6</sup> *Sumatra, Crossroads of Cultures*, KITLV Press, Leiden, 2009 (Essay on Islam in Sumatra: History and Culture, by Desrika Retno Widyastuti, pp.113-114)

<sup>7</sup> Widyastuti, 2009, p.114

<sup>8</sup> *Batik: Drawn in Wax, 200 Years of Batik Art from Indonesia* in the Tropenmuseum collection, IC van Hout, Amsterdam Royal Tropical Institute, 2001 (Islamic Talismans: the Calligraphy Batiks, Fiona Kerlogue)

<sup>9</sup> *Conversations with Mr Feener, Ms Zulkifli and Mr Khir Johari*

<sup>10</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, IB Tauris, 1990

# The Blue Flowers of Singapore

By Mathew Welch

A curious observation of tropical flowers in Singapore is that the colour palette tends to be dominated by orange or red or bright pinks such as the ubiquitous *heliconia*, *ixora* or *bougainvillea*, unlike what one finds in temperate European zones. Even *dendrobium* orchids (Fig 1), which have a broader range of colours, are rarely a true blue. Blue flowers are less common (less than one plant in ten is blue) as a true blue pigment doesn't exist in plants.<sup>1</sup> So when we see a blue flower, it is often startling and can be particularly delightful.



Fig 1. *Dendrobium*, as seen in Singapore's Botanic Garden. Photo courtesy of Joyce Le Mesurier

## Butterfly Pea / Nonya Blue Pea

One of the most striking and iconic blue flowers of Singapore is the blue pea or butterfly pea (*clitoria ternatea*), a perennial herbaceous plant that grows as a climbing vine with an abundance of deep blue flowers (Fig 2). The fruits are seedpods similar to green beans, about 5-7 cm long and containing about half a dozen seeds.



Fig 2. The Butterfly Pea/ Nonya Blue Pea. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Domart

The butterfly pea is found throughout Southeast Asia, as far away as India and South America. In Singapore it's easy to identify by its iconic deep blue flowers. The blue petals contain an anthocyanin pigment with various uses, not least as a food colouring that was especially popular with the Peranakan Chinese in various Nonya *kueh*, as well as in a startling blue herbal tea that is the traditional Peranakan answer to a *tisane* or chamomile tea.

The Butterfly Pea plant contains cyclic peptides known as *Clotides*, compounds that appear to have anti-microbial health benefits, so the Peranakan traditional wisdom of the Butterfly Pea's health-giving aspects may actually have a scientific basis. In the northeastern states of Peninsular Malaysia, it is used in *Nasi Kerabu*, a dish common in Kelantan as well as in Thailand and Laos where the sweet dessert *Khao Tom* or *Khao Tom Mat* (boiled rice) is made of

glutinous sticky rice wrapped in banana leaf and occasionally coloured with the blue pea.

The plant was first recorded by the famous 18<sup>th</sup> century botanist Linnaeus from specimens found on the Indonesian island of Ternate, hence the Latin name he gave to this genus, *clitoria ternatea*, which derives both from the island of Ternate and the flower's assumed physical resemblance to a part of the female anatomy. Across the Bay of Bengal in traditional Indian Ayurvedic medicine, the Butterfly Pea is also said to help as an anti-depressant. In view of all of the above, it is no surprise that a more modern culinary use of Butterfly Pea flowers is to colour various liquors such as gin. Blue Butterfly Pea-infused gin is even available at Marks & Spencer™ and is an excellent ingredient for colourful cocktails that may also, as noted above, have unique health-giving properties.

The plant is very easy to cultivate from the seeds found in the abundant seedpods. When the pods turn brown, they can be split open. Soak the seeds, then plant them in a neutral potting soil.

## Thunbergia / Bengal Clock Vine / Blue Trumpet Vine

*Thunbergia* is a genus of about 100 climbing plants and a few shrubs (Fig 3). Typical examples are the *Thunbergia Grandiflora* or *Thunbergia Laurifolia*, which has a delightful blue flower found all over Singapore. It is a vigorous woody climber with typically pale-blue, trumpet-shaped flowers although white and purple varieties also exist and form in dropping clusters. They can grow up to 20 metres high and have an exceptionally deep root system, although they can also be cultivated in pots.

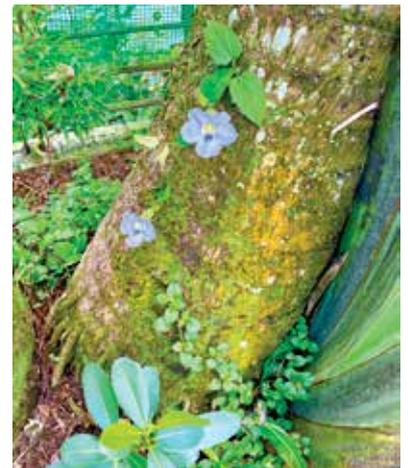


Fig 3. *Thunbergia*. Photo courtesy of Mathew Welch

In nature, the *Thunbergia Grandiflora* vine grows up trees, but in Singapore is commonly found on the wire fencing around condos and provides an attractive greenery that visually improves wire fences all around the island. It grows very quickly, so if you have an ugly wire fence, a *Thunbergia Grandiflora* is your best bet to cover it with something more attractive.

The name derives from Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), a renowned Swedish botanist active in Africa and Japan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The plant appears to be native to China, India and Burma with other examples of the genus in Africa and Madagascar. In Thailand, it is known as *Rang Jeud* and in Malaysia as *Akar Tua*, where the crushed leaves are used for herbal medicines and herbal teas, credited with reducing fevers and other medicinal benefits. *Thunbergia* can be found for sale at the Thompson Road nurseries, but is relatively easy to propagate from cuttings. Take a cutting from the woody part of the vine and let it sit in water until it sprouts roots, then plant it in potting soil.

### Morning Glory / *Ipomea Tricolor*, Heavenly Blue

Perhaps the most spectacular blue flowering vine that can be seen in Singapore is the Morning Glory or *Ipomea Tricolor* (Fig 4), native to the Americas and Mexico. It's a member of the *Convolvulus* family (*Convolvulaceae*), a large family of more than 1,600 species of herbaceous vines sometimes known as bindweed. The cultivated varieties typically have brightly coloured funnel-shaped flowers. The stems are winding, hence the family name *Convolvulaceae*, derived from the Latin verb to wind 'convolvere'.



Fig 4. *Ipomea Tricolor* or the common Morning Glory. Photo courtesy of Mathew Welch

The Morning Glory *Ipomea Tricolor* is unusual in that the flowers are a striking cerulean blue. They flower in the early morning, hence the name, and the colour changes and deepens as the day wears on. By afternoon, the flowers have typically closed.

The seeds of the plant are poisonous, and definitely not for consumption, although they were apparently used in Mexico by the Aztecs in various religious ceremonies. Commercial seeds are sometimes treated with toxic compounds to underline that they are not for consumption.

Although normally described as growing two to four metres, in Singapore's tropical climate the *Ipomea Tricolor* can easily grow six to nine metres up a tree in just a few months although the plants are relatively short-lived so need to be regularly re-planted.

In a sunny location in Singapore, a mature *Ipomea Tricolor* Heavenly Blue can provide a spectacular display of bright blue flowers each morning for several months before needing to be replanted.

### Other blue flowers of Singapore

Also found in Singapore is *Rotheca Myricoides* (Fig 5), a form of *Buddleia*. The name *Rotheca* is from the southern Indian language Malayalam and means small teak. A



Fig 5. *Rotheca Myricoides* as seen in the Jurong Lake Gardens. Photo courtesy of Joyce Le Mesurier

<sup>1</sup> The plant pigment that creates the blue in flowers is the same one that produces the hues of certain grapes such as Concord grapes, cranberries, and pomegranates: Delphinidin, which is an anthocyanidin as well as an antioxidant.



Fig 6. *Otacanthus Caeruleus* or the Brazilian Snapdragon. Photo courtesy of Mathew Welch

native of Africa, it is sometimes referred to as *Clerodendrum Myricoides*. The shrub has delicate blue flowers that attract butterflies, hence its more common name is Butterfly Bush.

A smaller blue flower that thrives in Singapore is the *Otacanthus Caeruleus*, a medium-sized herbaceous perennial originally from Brazil that has large, two-lipped blue or purple flowers and grows about 60cm high (Fig 6). It has a distinctive aroma, a bit like pine or mint and the flowers last well in a pot. Once established, the *Otacanthus* lives long and can spread prolifically.

In summary, although Singapore is sometimes known as the Garden City, we tend to see the same plants and in the same colour palette of reds and oranges everywhere, but in fact, there are several species of wonderful blue plants that thrive in Singapore. Not to be missed are the *Durata erecta* (Fig 7) or Sky Flower named after a 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian botanist, and this Boat Quay favourite, the herb *Orthosiphon aristatus* (Fig 8) which needs little imagination to guess the origins of its popular name, Cat's Whiskers. (This image is also on the cover.)



Fig 7. *Duranta Erecta*. Photo courtesy of Joyce Le Mesurier



Fig 8. *Orthosiphon aristatus* or Cat's Whiskers, used in the treatment of diabetes. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Domart

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**Mathew Welch** is an FOM member who enjoys visiting the region's botanical gardens.

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# In Search of Divine Benevolence in a Timurid Turquoise Blue Tile

By Mary Jane Edleson

This impressive turquoise ceramic tile (Figs 1 and 1a) is thought to have once been an inscriptional panel on a protective revetment façade of an extensively decorated mausoleum, such as the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis in Samarqand, present-day Uzbekistan, where several family members of its dynasty founder, Timur, were buried. The rich shade of the tile's turquoise blue is typical of the architectural ornamentation of the Timurid period of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, considered a high point in the world of Islamic arts and architecture.

Lavish overall decoration of buildings remains one of the most characteristic features of Islamic architecture, starting from at least the eighth century onwards. Both religious monuments as well as secular developments featured an array of styles and techniques that reflected the multiplicity of Muslim societies and their numerous cultural expressions. Stylistic diversity in surface decoration was achieved through a broad range of techniques (mosaic, stucco, brick and ceramic), combined with variety in ornamental motifs (figurative, vegetal, geometric and calligraphic), to form a unique Islamic aesthetic, one that is well characterised in this tile.

The ACM artefact label tells us only that this tile is glazed terracotta (a type of earthenware), which would have been a common material used for tile and brick making in the area of Samarqand. But a very similar tile from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig 2) suggests a stonepaste body. The ACM has another 'pierced' tile with a geometric motif (Fig 3), one that is noted to have a fritware body. To clarify the difference between these clay bodies, stonepaste (another name for fritware) involves

adding frit (ground glass) into the clay body to reduce its fusion temperature. The resulting mixture can be effectively

fired at a lower temperature than unamended clay alone. It is common for a glaze to be added on the surface to harden the piece. So the ACM ceramic tile chosen for this discussion may well be made of stonepaste because of its close physical similarities to the other examples cited.

This tile has a distinctive turquoise blue colour, reminding us of the important signifier that colour has played since the early beginnings of Islamic art. Blue represents life-giving water, the sky and the realm of the stars, making this colour a vital symbol of God's divine benevolence.

The tile appears to have been carefully hand-carved in a single piece when the clay was still soft. It was carved in relief and shaped to fit neatly, puzzlelike, with the adjacent tiles to form a banded decoration, suggested by the smooth, unbroken sides of the tile. On this tile, there are at least three noteworthy ornamentation motifs that interact with each other to form a complex design, encouraging the viewer to take close notice in order to discern the inscriptional message.

Firstly, the tile features a fragmentary calligraphic inscription in so-called Kufic script, which would have been repeated throughout the revetment. The Arabic inscription reads *al-mulk [li'-llah]*, translated as, 'Sovereignty is [for God]', or 'Sovereignty belongs to God'. This inscription is commonly seen on many forms of Islamic cultural expression, including monuments, ceramics, woodwork and metalwork.

Kufic calligraphy developed during the end of the seventh century. It



Figs 1 and 1a. Timurid tile with Kufic Inscription, western Central Asia, late 14<sup>th</sup> century / Timurid period, glazed terracotta. Inscription reads *al-mulk [li'-llah]*, translated as, "Sovereignty is [for God]" Photos by the author

was thought to have been named after the city of Kufa in southern Iraq, but there are varying opinions about this. Some scholars refer to this script as 'early Abbasid' suggesting it probably evolved from earlier Arabic scripts. Kufic script was the first calligraphy used for the Qur'an, although it was not easy to use when writing lengthy text. It had angular letters with short vertical strokes and a horizontal orientation, rarely descending below the baseline. It was often written without the use of diacritics (marks appended to the letters) or other conventional orthographic signs, so it could be difficult to read and potentially lead to variant readings of the authoritative sacred text.

Calligraphy, as we generally recognise it, is the art of writing created for beauty as well as to convey ideas. Some of the most spectacular expressions of calligraphy are found in Islamic art, created by artisans throughout the vast areas where Islam became the predominant religion. Calligraphy developed high status as an art form in the Islamic decorative repertoire because it was used to disseminate the Qur'an, which is the Word of Allah (God), along with the *Hadiths* (Prophetic Traditions) and other religious teachings. Calligraphy was also employed as a vehicle for ornamentation, which, being highly stylized and hence wholly distinct from the representative art forbidden by the *Shari'a* (Sacred Law), was deemed acceptable to the *ulama* (religious scholars).



Fig 2. Architectural tile with partial Inscription. Attributed to present-day Uzbekistan. Stonepaste, carved and glazed. Object size: 36 x 28 x 7.5 cm. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Secondly, there is a kind of 'endless knot' motif in the centre of the tile where the uprights of the letters are interlaced and knotted to create a complex pattern. This knot motif reminds us that the driving force in early Islamic art was the quest for ways to represent the unity of God.

A third decorative element is the extensive use of foliated and floriated motifs known as 'arabesques' entwined in the calligraphy and filling the empty spaces. The arabesques are placed at a slightly lower plane from the main inscription, providing graphic support and increased flow to the script.

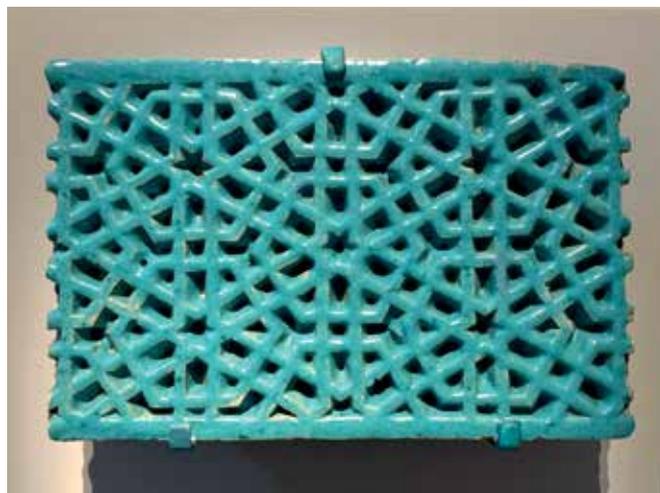


Fig 3. Pierced tile, western Central Asia, late 14<sup>th</sup> century (Timurid period) Frit body, opaque glaze, courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, #2009-01518

These types of vegetal motifs were added to the tips of Arabic letters for decorative purposes, and then took on a spiritual dimension. Floral motifs and rosettes help to combine the letters. The inspiration for using the arabesque motifs seems to have come from vines and acanthus decoration commonly used in the classical world. The popularity of the arabesque as a vegetal ornament was based on its infinite versatility: undulating floral scrolls could be adapted in size and made to fit monumental architectural spaces on tiles or painted surfaces, or reduced to fit the margins of manuscripts, or the decoration of metalwork and ceramic objects.

So what do we know about the Timurid, who supposedly made this tile? They were the last great dynasty to emerge from the Central Asian steppe. In 1370, the eponymous founder, Timur (Tamerlane, or Timur the Lame), who came from a Turko-Mongol tribe, settled in the province of Transoxiana and became the leader, establishing Samarqand as his capital. It was under Timur, who succeeded the Mongols, that Samarqand went on to become one of the most glorious capitals in the then known world.

During the Timurid period, princes and rulers were prodigious builders of mosques, madrasas, convents and Sufi shrines. One of Samarqand's most moving and beloved sites is the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis with its stunning avenue of mausoleums, where some of the richest tilework in the Muslim world is featured (possibly including the tile discussed here). The name, which means 'Tomb of the Living King', refers to its original, innermost and holiest shrine – a complex of cool, quiet rooms around what is probably the grave of Qusam ibn-Abbas, who is said to have brought Islam to this area in the seventh century.

By bringing skilled artisans from different conquered lands to his capital in Samarqand, Timur was able to launch one of the most brilliant periods in Islamic art. This handsome ACM turquoise blue tile encourages us to imagine how Timurid art was so effectively able to both draw from and create inspiration from Anatolia to India during its time.

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**Mary Jane Edleson** is a culinary enthusiast, studying the relationship between food, culture and the environment. She has lived in several Southeast Asian countries for more than four decades and is proud to be an ACM docent.

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# Buddha Blue

By Darlene D Kasten



Intaglio Seal with Footprints of the Buddha, *lapis lazuli, circa fourth century, Gandhara, Pakistan. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

Have you ever noticed the blue colour that is used in images of the Buddha? What does it mean? When I asked a leading expert, Kurt Behrendt, Associate Curator of South Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, that very question, he replied that he knew of no particular ascription for its use – neither enlightenment nor harmony nor wisdom nor even truth. However, its frequent incidence still begs the question, “What is the origin of the association?”

Clues can be found in the remote Badakshan region of northeast Afghanistan, an all-but-inaccessible area located behind the Hindu Kush. Once the capital of the Gandharan empire stretching from Pakistan to Afghanistan, the region nurtured some of the most skilled Buddhist workshops in history. It is here we find not only the birthplace of Buddha images around the second century CE, but also one source of the majestic mineral lapis lazuli. That the two found each other in Buddhist art shouldn't be too surprising.

Lapis lazuli as a precious stone has been greatly prized by Asian and European cultures for more than 6,000 years and until relatively recently, its ornamental value was on a par with, or even exceeded, that of the diamond. An aura of mystery has always surrounded this gemstone, perhaps because of the inaccessibility of its principal mines.

Another reason is most certainly its intoxicating appearance. One observer has written, “the finest specimens of lapis, intensely blue with speckled waves and swirls of shining gold-coloured pyrite, resemble the night aglow with myriads of stars.” As a consequence, lapis lazuli gained a reputation as a powerful stone and was often used in the decoration and ornamentation of sacred art.

Prior to the second century CE, Buddhist art did not directly feature the Buddha. Instead, typical sculptures of the period featured symbolic images such as the Buddha's footprints, his empty chair or his riderless horse. When sculptors finally did create the first statues of the Buddha, they

had to rely on their knowledge of history and descriptions found in discourses and sutras such as the Pali Canon.

Although not carved lapis lazuli, the eyes of the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, bronze Sukothai Walking Buddha are blue. Blue eyes are one of the Thirty-two Characteristics of a Great Man enumerated in the Pali Canon. Here the colour blue may be explained by the Buddha's noble lineage as he was born in northern India in the sixth century BCE in the Shakya kingdom. The Shakya people are described as Indo-Aryans, known to have certain Caucasian characteristics, one of which is blue eyes.

Blue is found in multitudes of images of the Buddha in another form, a pigment called ultramarine made from ground lapis lazuli with the impurities removed. The earliest recorded use of ultramarine was in the seventh century in the Afghan town of Bamiyan, home of some of the world's richest Buddhist art. Carved into the side of a mountain were two giant Buddha sandstone sculptures. The larger Buddha was painted red and the smaller one was multi-coloured, including blue, each with a rainbow aura fresco containing ultramarine between stripes of yellow ochre, white lead and red vermilion. Unfortunately, the frescoes have faded and the statues themselves were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, but the tradition of the rainbow aura containing blue carried on, perhaps most beautifully in Tibetan Buddhist thangka. The ACM has several exquisite examples.

Indeed to this day, blue is most often found in Buddhist art made in Tibet and the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal where the colour is associated with purity and healing. Many Buddhas display blue hair or blue skin, including Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, Vairocana, the universal or primordial Buddha, and Bhaisajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha, often represented holding a blue medicine bowl. Now that you know, you'll never stop noticing.

# Singapore as Muse

By Darlene D Kasten



Vegetable Print - Okra Spiral #6, 2012, Relief print, 100% cotton paper, water base ink, lady's finger. © Haegue Yang / STPI. Photo courtesy of the Artist and STPI

STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery is a working art print studio and exhibition space housed in a former 19<sup>th</sup> century warehouse along the Singapore River, and since its opening in 2002, has welcomed more than 100 artists from all over the world. When they take up residency, the artists expect to have at their disposal a range of print technologies, an expert creative team for collaboration, and the largest art paper mill in Asia. Some also get something they may not have anticipated – inspiration for their work from Singapore itself.

For Korean sculptor and installation artist Haegue Yang, it was the food markets of Little India. She was always fascinated by Singapore's diverse culture and found the variety of exotic vegetables and spices that are readily available at the markets here, simply inspiring. After Yang visited Little India for the first time, she decided to turn something commonplace into something sublime. Ganthoda powder, dry mango powder, *da huang* powder and nigella were among the unusual-looking and -sounding spices that provided Yang with the starting point for her *Spice Moons* – circles of spices whose rough textures and earthy hues evoked your sense of sight, smell, taste and touch.

In her series *Vegetable Prints*, traditional art techniques such as relief printing and decal were adapted and local vegetables were set into motion. In one series, she sliced okra, covered the slices in bright blue ink, and pressed them into STPI handmade paper to produce dynamic spirals of enchanting blue flowers.

Indonesian performance artist Melati Suryodarmo found her inspiration in an abandoned mansion with a long history in Singapore, the former Istana Woodneuk. At times it served as the residence for the Temenggong of Johor and during darker days, as a military base. Purchased by the Singapore government in 1990, it was left abandoned and uncared for, falling into ruin, its surroundings covered by thick vegetation. The istana also suffered many fires in its history and in 2006 there was a major fire that burned the building

down. Its blue roof tiles caved in and its condition was deemed structurally unsafe and beyond repair.

Melati had brought the idea of using abandoned spaces and memories with her to Singapore, but her vision took root when she discovered the former istana for herself. She created handmade mulberry paper casts from objects such as tiles, iron, part of the railings and the wooden floors – things that conjured up memories from her old homes. Melati explained, "Although I could have taken the object itself and placed it in the work, the object in and of itself, has no meaning. To cast it, and then to leave it as an imaginary form, was important to me. It references the house, the history of the house and the families that lived there."

The fantastical world of Singapore's Har Paw Villa served as the inspiration for American mixed media artist Trenton Doyle Hancock. Visiting the Chinese mythological theme park, Hancock was taken by the peculiar treatment of imagery. Comparing Har Paw Villa to American theme parks, he wondered what Disneyworld – the "happiest place on earth" – would be like with dioramas of Mickey Mouse being decapitated and Goofy being gutted. Hancock was impressed with the park's creators and their insistence on following through with an idea no matter how absurd, saying "that is where art and beauty converge."

More than just inspiration, Hancock credits his residency at STPI as a turning point in his career. He said that one of the special opportunities offered by STPI was the chance to reinterpret his work through the medium of papermaking, evidenced in his densely layered, cast paper works and intricate, assembled collages of lithographs and etchings. To paraphrase the Bard, "O! for a Muse of Singapore, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention."

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

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# The Mask Takes Centre Stage

By Heike Bredenkamp

In mid-April it will be one year since it became mandatory to wear a mask when stepping out of the house in Singapore. The reason – to keep the COVID-19 virus and thus a pandemic, at bay.

Throughout history, masks have served a purpose – from ritual and sacred practices, to celebrations, protection, disguise and entertainment. The oldest masks found are 9,000 years old and made from stone. Discovered in locations near Jerusalem, they have round eyes, tiny noses and a prominent display of teeth. They were possibly made to resemble the spirits of dead ancestors. Created at the dawn of civilisation, these Neolithic masks kick off a timeline featuring a host of masks from around the world. Each tells its own story of how human society breathes life, spirit, passion and personality into these fascinating objects that cover people's faces.

Although central China's Hubei province might have gained worldwide recognition as the region where COVID-19 was first detected, it is also an area where gifted artists carve and paint the distinguished wooden masks of Nuo opera. This dramatic art form serves as a religious folk ritual to counter natural disasters, evil spirits and diseases, and to welcome harvests, longevity and other blessings. It has been practised for more than 1,000 years; some say a considerable time longer, and date it to the Zhou dynasty, which ruled before the Common Era.



Nuo Opera Mask, image courtesy of CGTN (China Global Television Network)

Without masks, the performers are said to be mere humans; putting on the mask transforms them into spirits and gods. Skillfully made by artists to look friendly, ferocious or fearful, theatre troupes can wear several dozen to 200 different masks during a performance.

The Asian Civilisations Museum has its own wall of masked fame. These dramatic characters have been carved from wood and painted to resemble their temperaments. Masterfully sculpted almost a century ago on the island of Java, they form a crucial part of the costumes worn by *wayang topeng* performers, who integrate dancing, singing, music and on occasion, spoken narration into their art form.

Similar to the aforementioned masks, these are believed to be sacred objects. There is a small leather strip found at the back of each mask behind the mouth. The wearer is required to bite down on this strip and tightly clench it between his teeth to keep mask on, giving up his day-to-day identity and allowing the spirit of the character to enter his entire



#FOMaskerade Contest Winner, Singapore Skyline, mask and photo by Angie Ng

being. You may also see two half-masks which leave the jaw free. These belong to the narrator, who is also the jester and entertainer.

Although silent in the gallery, they tell a vibrant tale of a kingdom, where the bride of the fictional Javanese Prince Panji is kidnapped on the eve of their wedding day. The lovers are

determined to be together and never give up hope, in a plot that has everything a blockbuster film has today: romance, heroes, villains, mistaken identities, adventure, battles, and numerous twists and turns. Spoiler alert: it is a love that conquers all, and Panji and his bride reunite in a happily-ever-after scene.

#FOMaskerade was one way to highlight how prevalent the mask has become in today's society. The contest winner is Angie Ng with her *Singapore Skyline* mask. Runner up is Sim Chong-Teck with his *Lotus* mask.

Thank you to all who participated!



#FOMaskerade contest runner up, Lotus, mask and photo by Sim Chong-Teck

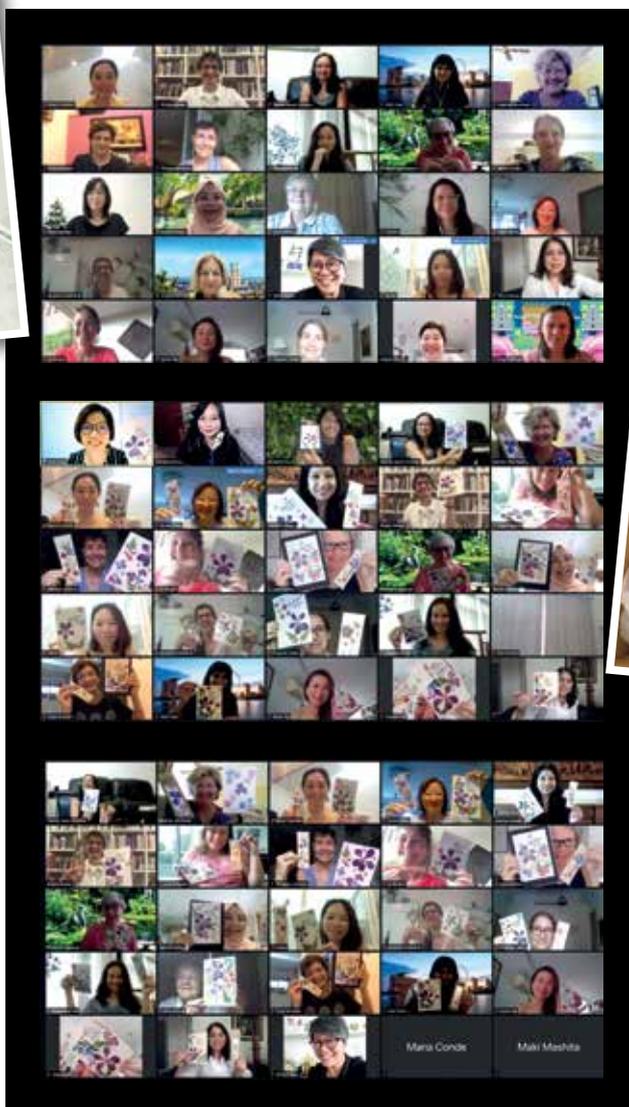
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**Heike Bredenkamp** is an ACM docent and a writer from South Africa. She delights in humour, silly puns and the calm existence of being "Afroporean".

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# A Pressing Engagement: the FOM Leadership “Thank You” Celebration

By Jo Wright



How do you celebrate and acknowledge FOM members in leadership positions who make the organisation work as smoothly as it does? In the past it was relatively easy – simply gather everyone together for a meal or a drink and say those thank you’s in person. But how to do a leadership event in these socially distanced times?

In one of the more unusual Zoom calls I’ve ever logged into, I found myself at the event billed as the “FOM Leaders’ Crafternoon” – a pressed flower workshop that had been organised by Christine Zeng, FOM’s council member in charge of Appreciation. A couple of days beforehand I had received a large cardboard box filled with various goodies, including small packets of pressed flowers, some sheets of transparent sticky-backed plastic, a small notebook and strips of card. What were these for, what was I do with them and how on earth would it all work?

All was revealed by our very patient online instructor,

Vicki, who took us through the step-by-step process of how to create pressed flower art and even how to press fresh flowers ourselves. By the end of a convivial two hours, we had completed our very own bookmarks and even the cover to the notebook.

We eagerly posed for photos at the end of the workshop, proudly holding aloft our pressed flower creations, with everyone feeling very ‘together’ and very well appreciated. Well done and thank you to the FOM council for putting on such an unusual and unexpectedly enjoyable appreciation event!

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**Jo Wright** has been volunteering as a docent with FOM since 2009.

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Photos by Garima Lalwani and screenshots by Christine Zeng

# Guiding in the Time of COVID

## From an FOM Docent's Perspective

By Charlotte Dawson

2020 started full of hope and well wishes for the new year. The new decade's round number felt special. If nothing else, 2020 *did* turn out to be a memorable year, practically from its very outset.

Owing to the severity and spread of COVID-19, on Friday 7 February 2020, the government elevated the medical risk level by declaring DORSCON Orange. Effective the following Monday, guiding at all FOM-affiliated museums, heritage institutions and heritage trails stopped. These were initially temporary measures that were extended as time went on – into March and then April – until the Circuit Breaker began in earnest two months after DORSCON Orange. While guiding ceased, the docent training programmes were able to complete their courses, adapting as time went on to include social distancing measures, removing shared food from the breaks, and eventually going to Zoom to complete final gallery talks and/or mentor tours.

The Circuit Breaker itself lasted 55 days. In this time, we were all in a 'lockdown', with children experiencing distance learning and spouses working from home as we also adapted to our own work-from-home needs. We entered Phase 1 on 2 June and Phase 2 only a couple weeks later. For a grand total of 195 days FOM docents could not guide. So, what did our docents do? We took learning and guiding online!

Docents from various institutions worked together on Zoom to create virtual Docent Ongoing Training (DOT) events, museum-related research and soapbox virtual tours, recreate-an-artefact challenges and town hall-type sessions. The curators asked the IHC team to film a short video on guiding an artefact they admire. Rather than drifting apart, many came together during this period to support one another and give back to the docent community that has given them much through the years.

There was much excitement when the museums reopened on 26 June, although measures that precluded guiding remained in place. But that excitement sparked hope, which in turn sparked the creation of a new collaborative effort across our affiliated museums, heritage institutions and trails: *Asian Art and History for Museum Enthusiasts*. The docents from all 11 places where FOM members guide banded together to give talks and tours to those who registered for this unique online workshop, described by Aditi Kaul on the facing page.

As the workshop commenced, guiding resumed. Across the board at all our museums and heritage institutions, tours look different now: groups of five (now up to eight in Phase 3), everyone in masks, safe entry scans and hand sanitizer before starting, are a few of the safety measures in place.



Guiding - Safe distancing photo by Charlotte Dawson

In some museums the docents were eager to get back into guiding, while some were more reticent. Others still, such as the heritage trails docents, are eager to return to guiding, but are not yet approved to do so. Despite the changes to how we guide and to a tour's group size, we are grateful for it since *this* is what we trained for: to share our passion for history, culture and art.

COVID-19 affected many of our regular docent events. For instance, our Public Information Meeting (PIM) also shifted from May to August, from live to online. The focus was no longer on docent training but on the new *Asian Art and History* workshop. This taught us well as we prepare for a virtual PIM on 23 March to introduce the docent training available this coming 2021/22 season. Training will adapt as many other things have, but as we are following all safety measures, we will be able to have training in person at our museums and heritage institutions.

In short, 2020 was the year that affected all aspects of life. FOM docents have been inspiring in the creative ways they have adapted to the ever-changing situation, growing closer through virtual DOTs and events, and embracing the next chapter with upcoming docent training. I believe that I speak for many when I say that I am proud to be an FOM docent and I am proud of how this community has fostered one another through this challenging time.

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**Charlotte Dawson** is a docent at NMS and the URA Chinatown Heritage Trails. She is also an Overall co-Head of Docent Training.

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# Asian Art and History for Museum Enthusiasts

## An Unforgettable Journey

By Aditi Kaul

In the middle of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world. Just emerging from a 'circuit breaker', masks and social distancing became the norm in Singapore. During these unprecedented times the idea of a new and exciting workshop was born. We called it Asian Art and History for Museum Enthusiasts (AAHME). A 10-week-long docent-led workshop, AAHME was to be delivered online through Zoom, bringing together all 11 FOM-affiliated museums, heritage institutions and heritage trails for the very first time.

The organising team of Laura Socha, Charlotte Dawson and Aditi Kaul quickly got in touch with our docent coordinators. All teams swung into action planning lectures, tours, reading material and personal enrichment topics. Our ever-flexible docents started thinking of innovative ways to adapt their skills to a new platform.

After a successful Public Information Meeting in August, the sign-ups came in thick and fast. We soon had 151 Museum Enthusiasts (MEs)! Between October and December last year, our docents presented thoroughly researched lectures every Tuesday morning. Through these stimulating lectures, we saw the many faces of the Buddha, got acquainted with the Sikh and Parsi communities, marvelled at the iconic Singapore shophouses and learned much, much more.

These lectures whetted our appetites for the treat awaiting us on Friday when docents took us into the galleries of each museum and heritage institution. We also hit the bustling streets of the historical Chinatown district and Kampong Gelam – all virtually, of course, from the comfort of our homes. An added bonus (thanks to Zoom) was the incredible opportunity to bring to life, just for our MEs, artefacts from museums currently closed for renovation.

The weekly personal enrichment exercise made Fridays even more fabulous. The Breakout Room feature on Zoom allowed us to assign our MEs to smaller groups, led by a facilitator. Lively discussions saw MEs digging up treasures in Chinatown, discovering fascinating stories behind the names of several MRT stations and even performing an art heist! Having personally participated in several discussions, the MEs' comprehensive research and passionate commitment blew me away, leaving me truly enriched each time.

Particularly remarkable was that the camaraderie and friendship created online, flourished offline too. MEs and facilitators enjoyed several outings together. One of our MEs remarked, "Best \$50 I spent this year – thanks not only



*Friendships created in the virtual world flourished in the 'real world': MEs enjoying a fun outing together! Photo by Maria Carvalho*



*Virtual tour of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. Photo by Aditi Kaul*

to the content, but the amazing friends I made in other participants."

The digital platform helped widen our horizons. Sometimes MEs logged in from quarantine facilities and many 'international MEs' joined us too. Some docents presented excellent lectures from overseas, waking up at the crack of dawn, sometimes earlier.

Our '5-minute breaks' were unlike any other! Programme lead Charlotte transformed into "DJ Charlotte" serenading us with a fantastic selection of music. We grabbed a steaming cuppa while enjoying Western classical

music, bhangra beat, songs from Cantonese opera, and who would have ever thought that The B-52's *Love Shack* could be the theme song for SYSNMH? We often found ourselves humming along to a familiar tune or putting on our dancing shoes.

AAHME was a truly memorable experience. To quote an ME: "The past 10 weeks have been an incredible opportunity to learn more about each of the FOM-affiliated museums, their history and artefacts, not to mention the important people who make up Singapore's history. I only wish there was a part two that was beginning in 2021 since now my Tuesdays and Fridays will feel empty." For some, it was a ray of sunshine in an otherwise grim year. "Best thing to happen in 2020 AAHME!" We couldn't have hoped for any better.



*All smiles after an enriching discussion! Photo by Aditi Kaul*

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**Aditi Kaul** is currently Overall co-Head of Docent Training and was on the organising team for the Asian Art and History for Museum Enthusiasts workshop.

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## Island Notes

# The Orient Express

By Darly Furlong

To the travel-starved among us, the pop-up attraction *Once upon a time on the Orient Express* at Gardens by the Bay, which is on until June, provides an insight into the old-world charm it represents.

The Orient Express has been synonymous with luxury since its inception in 1883. On display in Singapore are two carriages and an engine from the 1930s, including a fully kitted dining car with guests' intricate trinkets, private rooms with bunk-bed-style sleeping arrangements and a luggage compartment



with a dummy body. It is an homage to the famous Agatha Christie novel *Murder on the Orient Express*. While the train is not operational any more, this might be our best chance to see this beauty one final time.



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

## FOM Cares about our Friends and Neighbours

Last autumn, as we were phasing out of the COVID-19 Circuit Breaker, FOM members and friends still managed to gather within Singapore's published safety guidelines for two social service initiatives partnered with Singapore's South East Community Development Council (SECDC).

The FOM 3M Moves Exercise Challenge was a campaign to provide sanitising products to vulnerable households in the southeast district. FOM members were encouraged to form exercise groups to 'earn' credits in exchange for 3M household cleaning products distributed to needy residents. Every 20 minutes we exercised earned a beneficiary one cleaning product to help improve their lives at home. FOM members rose to the challenge and clocked 13,786 units (20 minutes each) in a variety of exercises.

We followed with our second annual FOM Walk for Rice where every 300 metres walked earned a needy resident in Singapore's southeast district a bowl *each* of white rice, brown rice, and oatmeal, all donated by FairPrice Foundation. We incorporated Singapore Sports safety guidelines into our planning by organising small groups for a walk in the Singapore Botanic Gardens (SBG).

We also invited FOM members to walk on their own and dedicate their distances to our total. 94 FOM members and friends walked 641 KM in the SBG and on their own, earning 2,137 bowls *each* of white rice, brown rice, and oatmeal for the needy.



FOM's association with the SECDC was formally documented when we were joined by representatives in the SBG who interviewed and walked with FOM members and friends to produce footage for a promotional video.

We have two environmental events planned for March, an NParks Dragonfly Watch and a OneMillion Trees movement Tree Planting. Check out our Members' Activities webpage on the FOM website and join the FOM Members Care! public Facebook group for more details on these and future events.

**Darlene D Kasten** is a coordinator with FOM Members Care. Composite photo by the author.

# Explore Singapore!

Owing to the COVID-19 limits imposed on gatherings, ES! tours are for members only and limited to 17 participants.



## Little India Heritage Walk

Thursday 4 March  
10:00 am – 12:00 noon  
Fee: \$30

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

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



## The Joy and Fun of Gamelan – a Workshop

Thursday 11 March  
10:00 am – 12:30 pm  
Fee: \$40  
Maximum 12 participants

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



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

Thursday 25 March  
10:00 am – 12:00 noon  
Fee: \$25

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



## Eurasians Say Teng Bong (Hello)

Thursday 8 April  
10:00 am – 1:00 pm  
Fee: \$40 (including lunch)

Eurasians are the descendants of inter-racial marriages

that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when European (mainly Portuguese) men married local women. The Portuguese ruled Malacca for 130 years and left a legacy from these mixed marriages. When the British returned Malacca to the Dutch and set up an alternative trading post in Singapore, many Eurasians left Malacca to become pioneer settlers of modern Singapore. Although Eurasians have a distinct identity, much of it has been diluted over the years. Join us on a guided tour of the Eurasian Heritage Gallery and find out more about their history and culture. Lunch will be a sampling of traditional dishes such as Devil Chicken Curry.



## Dairy Farm History and Nature Walk

Thursday 22 April  
8:30 am – 11:30 am  
Fee: \$30

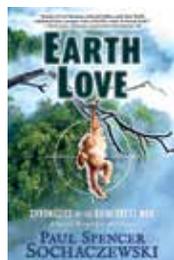
Did you know that Singapore once had a dairy farm producing high quality

fresh milk from Friesian cows? It was such an oddity here in the tropics, that it became known worldwide. The farm was in one of Singapore's oldest nature reserves – the present Dairy Farm Nature Park at the foot of Bukit Timah. The area (was) is well known for another reason. It was here that the famous British naturalist, Alfred Wallace, a contemporary of Charles Darwin and acknowledged as the other father of the theory of evolution, discovered many new bird and insect species.

Join Explore Singapore! on a journey through Singapore's natural history. Our guide will highlight the interesting flora and fauna of Dairy Farm Nature Park and the history of the area through artefacts from the past. You will also learn about Wallace's work in Singapore. He raised concerns about deforestation and the need for nature conservation in the mid-1850s, making him a pioneer in this field. We will also visit the newly set up community nursery for propagating and nurturing endangered native plants.

# Monday Morning Lectures

Currently all MML lectures are held online. Please download the Zoom app in order to attend. Lectures are open to FOM members only. Visit the Community Events page on the FOM website to sign up. Registration opens one week before the event. The lectures will begin promptly at 11:00 am.



## 1 March • The Rape of the Rainforest: Is It Wrong to Laugh?

Speaker: Paul Spencer Sochaczewski

*EarthLove* is Paul's satirical eco-adventure novel set in Geneva and two fictional nations in Borneo. He will discuss how satire might be an effective way to combat compassion fatigue and how his professional background and curiosity informed the book's eccentric characters and exaggerated plot lines. If time permits, he will suggest tips for people who want to write about their personal journeys.



## 8 March • Amrita Sher-Gil - An Exploration of Her Avant-Garde Artistic Universe

Speaker: Vidhya Nair

Born in Budapest, Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) lived in both India and Europe during her childhood. In her short life, she created works that gained recognition and influenced contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian artists. She lived her life on her own terms and many of her choices and perspectives were ahead of her time. In this International Women's Day talk, we will take a retrospective journey into this unique woman's life, her artistic works and her relevance today.



## 15 March • The Material Culture of a Maritime Muslim World

Speaker: R Michael Feener

This lecture presents an introduction to the art and architecture of the maritime Muslim world of Southeast Asia, tracing the historical processes through which Islam took root in diverse societies across this interconnected region, as they came to be integrated within the expanding world of Islam over the medieval and early modern periods.



## 22 March • Imagining an Exhibition: A "Herstory" of Pre-modern Southeast Asia

Speaker: Barbara Watson Andaya

This presentation imagines how a historian might stage an exhibition of Southeast Asian 'herstory' in the period 1400-1800. The ACM foyer and special exhibition gallery will be conceptualised as spaces for exploring various aspects of the female experience. Visual material, including items from the museum collection, will highlight how the lives of this region's women were influenced by the political, economic and religious changes that were significant in shaping Southeast Asia's past.



## 29 March • Adventures in Porcelain: The Hickleys, Dehua and the ACM

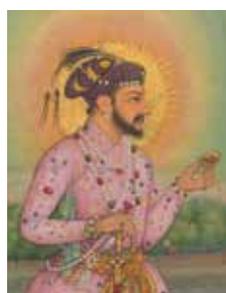
Speaker: Kenson Kwok

The gift of the Frank and Pamela Hickley collection of Blanc de Chine and subsequent acquisitions, have formed one of the strengths of the ACM. Kenson Kwok recounts his friendship with the Hickleys and the evolution of their collecting activities. He describes the conditions of ceramic production in Dehua at two points in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the collection's displays in Singapore museums since 1994. The talk concludes with a short re-assessment of the collection in light of on-going archaeological finds.

## 5 April • NO LECTURE OWING TO THE GOOD FRIDAY PUBLIC HOLIDAY (2 APR)

Happy Good Friday to all who celebrate Easter!

## 12 April • NO LECTURE OWING TO VAM (Volunteer Appreciation Morning)



## 19 April • The Ultimate Romance: Shah Jahan's Moonlight Garden

Speaker: Pia Rampal

When Mumtaz Mahal died, Shah Jahan commissioned the Taj Mahal on the riverbank in Agra. It was believed that he had begun to build his own tomb on the opposite bank of the river, a black marble 'Taj'. Instead, recent archaeological findings reveal Shah Jahan's grand plan, a fragrant Moonlight Garden. Here on a moonlit night, the emperor could gaze in wonder at two views of the Taj Mahal, the ultimate romance!



## 26 April • Mae Phra Thorani Wrings Her Hair: Reflections on the Role and Development of the Earth Goddess' Forms in Thai Buddhism

Speaker: M L Pattaratorn Chirapravati

Before Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the God of the Dead, Mara, sent his troops to prevent this. According to Buddhist texts, the Buddha reached out and requested the Earth Goddess, Bhumidevi (Mae Phra Thorani), to witness his enlightenment. This action became part of the iconographic representation of the enlightenment scene in Indian Buddha images. This lecture investigates Mae Phra Thorani's role and the transformation of her forms in Thai Buddhism.

# Textile Enthusiasts Group

In January, TEG opened its first Zoom event of the year to all FOM members. To join our activities, keep an eye out for announcements via the FOM e-newsletter and the TEG page on the FOM website. All events are being conducted online via Zoom unless announced otherwise. The Zoom link will be sent to registrants the evening prior to the programme. For enquiries, please email the coordinators at FOMTEGSingapore@gmail.com

**Programme:** Gold and Silk – 12 years of songket weaving in West Sumatra

**Date:** Friday 19 March

**Time:** 3:00 pm (sign in by 2:55pm) (please note, the timing is due to the speaker's location)



In their presentation, Bernhard Bart and Erika Dubler, the founders of Studio Songket Palantaloom, will take us through the history and traditions of Minangkabau *songket* weaving and a look into the meanings of

the patterns. They will discuss the techniques involved and their attempts to create more contemporary pieces while keeping traditional values.

When **Bernhard** stayed in West Sumatra in 1996 learning Indonesian, he fell in love with Minangkabau *songket* weaving. In 2008, he founded his own studio where dyeing, warping, preparing the loom, picking the patterns and weaving are all done under one roof.

**Programme:** Craft Couture: The Future of Textiles and Cultural Sustainability

**Date:** Friday 16 April

**Time:** 11:00 am (sign in by 10:55am)



India is one of the countries with living crafts and craftspeople, putting Indian design in a unique position where both the craft and the artisan become very important from a heritage and skills point

of view. At the same time, there is a need to recontextualise craft production to keep it relevant to the current times, requiring upgrading of vocabulary and design intervention.

Trained as a fashion and textile designer, **Gaurav Jai Gupta** debuted at the India Fashion Week (2010) under the label *Akaaro* and was the first Indian designer commissioned by the Woolmark Company to launch the 2014 Cool Wool Menswear collection for Raymonds in India. His work has been showcased in India and internationally, including at RMIT University, Australia, and Alchemy Festival, London. This talk has been facilitated by Canvas and Weaves, Singapore.

## Japanese Docents

The Tang dynasty (618-907), one of the greatest dynasties in Chinese history, had a huge influence on Japanese history. The Battle of Baekgang in 663 was Japan's greatest defeat in its premodern history. The Yamato court of Japan was totally defeated by the Tang's allied forces and the Silla kingdom of the Korean Peninsula. Owing to the scale and severity of their defeat, Japan was forced not only to focus on national defense but also to build a new national system.

The Japanese moved their capital from Naniwa-no-Miya (in present-day Osaka prefecture), which had been vulnerable to attack by sea, to a place farther inland near Lake Biwa. Then in 694, they moved it again to Fujiwara-Kyo (in present-day Nara prefecture). The new capital was built in a grid pattern based on the Chinese model.

A fully-fledged law called *Taiho-rituryo*, largely an adaptation of the governmental system of the Tang court, was established to maintain law and order and the country's name was changed from *Wakoku* to *Nihon*. It is still used today. Using this law, Japan rushed to improve its domestic system and dispatched diplomatic missions to the Tang court in 702. These were called *Kentoushi*.

*Kentoushi* brought the latest Chinese culture to Japan. It is believed that Tang *sancai* ware was also brought in by *Kentoushi*. Attracted by the beauty of *sancai*, the emissaries probably wanted to reproduce it themselves. That led to the Nara *sancai* of Japan.

With the beautiful Tang *sancai* artefact in front of me, I can't help but imagine Japan 1,300 years ago, when people worked hard to create a new national system.

**Ai Komatsu, Japanese Docent**



# FOM Council Members 2020-2021



**President: Garima Lalwani**

Garima is an American of Indian descent who has made Singapore her home for two decades. A member of FOM since 2007, she enjoys guiding for the ACM, SAM and GB as much as participating in various FOM activity groups. She is passionate about history, art, learning, and volunteering with like-minded people.



**Vice-President: Susan Fong**

Susan's keen interest in Peranakan history and culture led her to guide at the Baba House (2011) and the Peranakan Museum (2014-2015). She has taken Baba language classes to understand the patois. She served previously as Honorary Secretary for two years and because of her past experience on the council, she stepped up again as Vice President. Susan does indoor rowing and her creative pursuits include Ikebana, pottery, photography and baking.



**Honorary Secretary: Kwan Min Yee**

Min Yee is a Singaporean and received her Master's in Applied Linguistics degree from the National University of Singapore. During her years of living in China and the USA, she developed a keen interest and passion for the heritage and culture of her home country. She now volunteers at NMS.



**Honorary Treasurer: Yasmin Javeri Krishan**

A newbie to the FOM fold, Yasmin has an MBA in Finance and International Business from NYU Stern, and a Chartered Accountancy degree. Hailing from Mumbai, she has had professional and geographical exposure in India, the USA, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Singapore. In addition to the FOM council, she also volunteers at the grass roots level. Fluent in English, Hindi, Gujarati and conversant with Korean, Yasmin paints, pursues Indian classical music and is learning bridge.

**Council Representatives:**



**Kim Arnold** – A dedicated volunteer, Kim joined FOM in 2013 and has co-ordinated Asian Study Group and the Textile Enthusiasts Group. Fascinated by textiles and craft, she values the myriad opportunities provided by FOM to learn more about Asia and Singapore, through

film, books, study tours, lectures and guided tours.



**Charlotte Dawson** – With a background in architecture, specifically in project management, Charlotte's 14-year expat journey, with postings to six countries, has been filled with volunteer roles that have capitalised on this skill set. Most recently, Charlotte has completed three FOM docent training programmes and was one of the 2018/19 Co-Heads

of Training for NMS. Charlotte will work with her partner Aditi Kaul, to oversee all FOM docent training programmes. She enjoys spending time with her three high-school-aged children, the oldest of whom is set to leave for university in the autumn.



**Michelle Foo** – Michelle is a docent with the Malay Heritage Centre and the Peranakan Museum. She enjoys meeting people and learning from their experiences. Volunteering with FOM and guiding tours has enriched her social circle, allowing her to forge new and meaningful friendships. Having lived in Malaysia, Australia, Dubai, Thailand and now Singapore, Michelle is open to new ideas and challenges. As an optimist, she subscribes to the saying, "Smile, and the world smiles with you."



**Gisella Harrold** – Gisella has been an FOM member for the past 25 years and has been a very active volunteer throughout this time, taking on various roles. Currently, she is responsible for the council's communications, which include FOM's website, the membership base, the newsletter, and social media – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. If you have any suggestions, please contact her at [communications@fom.sg](mailto:communications@fom.sg). She is always happy to improve the communication channels.



**Irina Grishaeva** – Irina is from Russia and has been in Singapore for five years, guiding at the IHC and ACM. Having graduated from the Moscow State University of Education, majoring in history and also the ESSEC Business School, she applies her research and management skills to conducting and scheduling FOM tours. Irina is a sports enthusiast and also studies the history of art and religion.



**Laura Socha** – Laura represents our volunteer docents on the FOM Council. Her hardworking team includes the coordinators from all our participating institutions. Laura, originally from Scotland, joined the ACM docent training programme in 2014. Since graduating, she has remained an active member of the docent community where she has been the coordinator at ACM, led a special exhibition research group and is currently the co-head of ACM docent training.



**Christine Zeng** – 2020 forced organisations to rethink large-scale events and although daunting, this was not impossible. With the support of her teammates, Christine found creative ways to engage FOM volunteers. She has hosted a virtual Halloween bingo party, a Leaders' Crafternoon and also a murder mystery. She has some other wily plans up her sleeve for 2021.

## Coordinators Contact List



**ACM – Susanne Geerdink  
& Oksana Kokhno**  
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& Alka Kapoor**  
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**JDs**  
jdcoordinator1@yahoo.co.jp and jdcoordinator2@yahoo.co.jp

# Shang Antique

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*Vishnu and Lakshmi, Angkor Wat period, 12<sup>th</sup> c*



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# Museum Information and Exhibitions

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

## Asian Civilisations Museum

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555  
Tel: 6332 7798  
[www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg)

### Opening hours:

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

### FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 1:00 pm  
Mon to Fri 10:30 am and every second Saturday 1:30 pm (Japanese)  
First Thurs and third Tues of the month at 11:30 am (Korean)  
Second Thursday of the month 11:30 (Spanish)  
Third Thursday of the month 11:30 (French)

### Understanding Asia through Singapore

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

### thINK: Chinese Calligraphy, Connoisseurship and Collecting (through 25 Apr)

The act of remembering involves both storing and retrieving. Adopting an archival approach, the exhibition displays historical objects from the Ming and Qing periods within an intimate, contemporary setting. thINK (read "think ink") seeks to not only present, but to evoke personal responses, to provoke dialogues between the past and present, through time and space. Get acquainted with the art of the brush and reflect on issues such as how we communicate, and what we choose to hold dear.

## Gillman Barracks

9 Lock Road, Singapore 108937  
[www.gillmanbarracks.com](http://www.gillmanbarracks.com)

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

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

### FOM guided tours:

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

## Indian Heritage Centre

5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924  
[www.indianheritage.org.sg](http://www.indianheritage.org.sg)

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

### FOM guided tours: Tues-Fri

11:00 am for the permanent galleries  
2:00 pm on Wed and Fri for the special exhibitions  
Tamil tours (FOM) are by request for the special exhibition

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) celebrates the history and heritage of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. From early contacts between the Indian subcontinent and this region, the culture and social history of the community after the arrival of



the British, through to the early stirrings of nationalism and political identity, and the contributions of Singapore's Indian community – the five galleries take visitors on a fascinating journey through the Indian diaspora. Located in Singapore's colourful and vibrant Little India precinct, the centre opened in May 2015 and is our only purpose-built museum.

## Malay Heritage Centre

85 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198501  
Tel: 6391 0450  
[www.malayheritage.org.sg](http://www.malayheritage.org.sg)

### Opening hours:

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

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

### Urang Banjar: Heritage and Culture of the Banjar in Singapore (Through 25 Jul 2021)

In the fifth instalment in MHC's *Se-Nusantara* series of community co-curated exhibition and programmes on the ethnic cultural and diversity of the Malay community in Singapore, this exhibition focuses on the Banjarese community, or *Urang Banjar*, who are arguably the smallest group that make up the Malay community in Singapore. Many of them are able to trace the journeys of their ancestors from South Kalimantan in Singapore from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but also share a common ancestral language, material culture as well as a distinctive set of cultural norms and practices. The exhibition introduces the Urang Banjar as well as their culture and identity through ethnographic objects, community stories and treasured family belongings, which showcase their strong sense of kinship, industry and history.

## National Museum of Singapore

93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897  
Tel: 6332 3659  
[www.nationalmuseum.sg](http://www.nationalmuseum.sg)

### Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am – 7:00 pm

### FOM guided tours:

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

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

### Home, Truly: Growing Up with Singapore, 1950s to the Present (through Aug 2021)

The National Museum of Singapore presents *Home, Truly: Growing Up With Singapore, 1950s to the Present* in collaboration with The Straits Times, as part of the newspaper's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Featuring photographs and artefacts, including those contributed by members of the public, as well as audio-visual footage, sounds, scents and special digital features, *Home, Truly* explores the moments and experiences in Singapore's past and present that express our identity and collective memory as a people.



# Museum Information and Exhibitions

## NUS Museum, NUS Centre for the Arts

University Cultural Centre  
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore  
119279

Tel: 6516 8817

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



Free admission

### Opening hours:

**Tues to Sat 10:00 am – 6:00 pm, Closed on Sundays and Public Holidays,  
Monday: Visits by appointment for schools/faculties only.**

### Wishful Images: When Microhistories Take Form (through 25 Dec)

Five artists – Lucy Davis, Kao Chung-Li, Kuniyoshi Kazuo, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, and Aya Rodriguez-Izumi – whose artistic practices question the governmentality between the lived and the non-living, explore the impact of contemporary geopolitical realities recapitulated under the Asian Cold War through a re-historicisation of the past into the present.

*Wishful Images* resembles a collective attempt to relate lesser-known historical events through the persistent efforts of artists, recounted and re-articulated in various forms and mediums. Taking its cue from Ernst Bloch's concept of wishful images, the exhibition examines a constellation of unrealised possibilities, in which history, images, and politics triangulate.

### Wartime Artists of Vietnam: Drawings and Posters from the Ambassador Dato' N Parameswaran Collection (through 26 Jun)

This remarkable collection of 1,208 wartime artworks is one of the largest known private collection of its kind outside of Vietnam. Collected during Ambassador Dato' N. Parameswaran's tenure as Malaysia's Ambassador to Vietnam from 1990 to 1993 and built chiefly around artists associated to North Vietnam, Wartime Artists of Vietnam is the fourth in a series of shows drawing from this collection, which has been on long-term loan to the NUS Museum since 2015 to exhibit, research and facilitate teaching.

## NUS Baba House

157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883

Tel: 6227 5731

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

**English heritage tours: Tues - Fri, 10:00 am; Mandarin Heritage Tour: First Monday of each month, 10am;**

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

**To register, please visit [babahouse.nus.edu.sg/visit/plan-your-visit](http://babahouse.nus.edu.sg/visit/plan-your-visit)  
For enquiries, please email [babahouse@nus.edu.sg](mailto:babahouse@nus.edu.sg)**

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

## The Peranakan Museum

39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941

Tel: 6332 7591

[www.peranakanmuseum.sg](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)



This intimate museum possesses one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Peranakan objects.

Galleries on three floors illustrate the cultural traditions and the distinctive visual arts of the Peranakans. The museum is currently closed to prepare for its next phase of development.

## Singapore Art Museum

71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555

Tel: 6332 3222

[www.singaporeartmuseum.sg](http://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg)



The Singapore Art Museum focuses on international contemporary art practices, specialising in Singapore and Southeast Asia. The main building of the Singapore Art Museum (located along 71 Bras Basah Road) is currently closed to prepare it for its next phase of development.

## STPI Creative Workshop and Gallery

41 Robertson Quay, Singapore 238236

Tel: 6336 3663

[www.stpi.com.sg](http://www.stpi.com.sg)



### Opening hours:

**Mon to Fri: 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, Sat: 9:00 am –**

**6:00 pm, Sun: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm**

**Closed Public Holidays**

**FOM guided tours: Thurs 11:30 am,**

**Sat & Sun 2:00 pm**

**Please refer to STPI's website at [www.stpi.com.sg](http://www.stpi.com.sg) for STPI's public programmes and Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, French and special evening tours.**

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

## Heman Chong: Peace, Prosperity And Friendship With All Nations (Through 18 Apr)

From the Brexit coin, the back doors of embassies, the spy novel, and The Straits Times to the QR codes of Singapore's COVID-19 SafeEntry system, the artworks in the exhibition bring together a constellation of conceptual gestures based upon everyday encounters and autobiographical objects that chronicle the complex political and cultural landscape of our present moment.

## Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874

Tel: 6256 7377

[www.wanqingyuan.org.sg](http://www.wanqingyuan.org.sg)



### Opening hours:

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

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

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

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

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



Friends  
of the Museums  
Singapore

# Train as an FOM Volunteer Museum Guide



find out more about

## Museum Docent Training

at our

## Public Information Meeting

(Event conducted on ZOOM)



23 March 2021  
Tuesday | 10am



FOM training is conducted in English.

Event open to FOM members and public.

For more information / to register visit: [www.fom.sg](http://www.fom.sg)