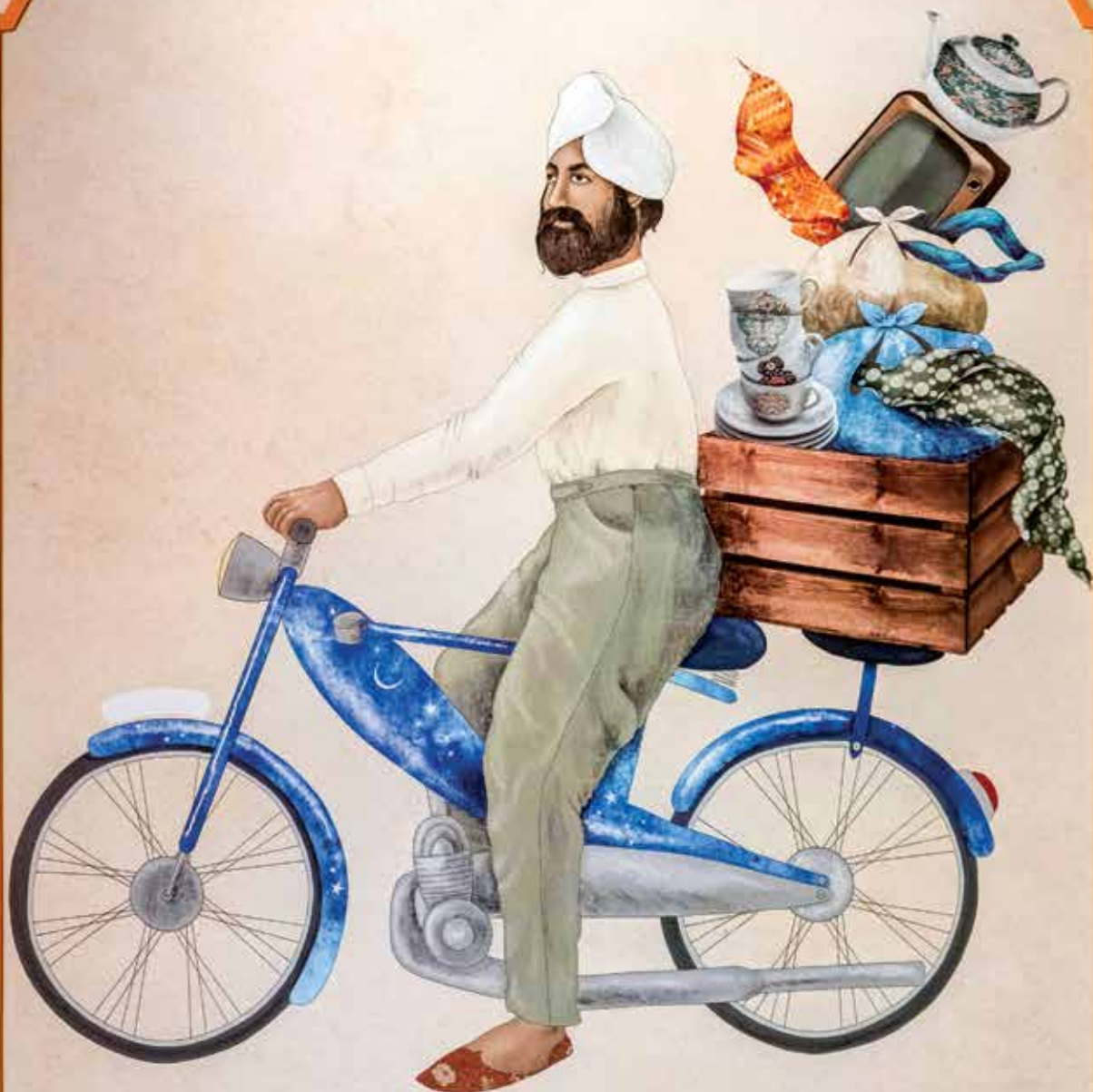


PASSAGE

Friends of the Museums Singapore

November / December 2021



Rigour by Keerat Kaur

art
history
culture
people



President's Letter

Dear Friends,

As I sit down to write my last letter for *PASSAGE* magazine, it seems as if three years have flown by in the blink of an eye. So much has changed since I took over the role of FOM President. We used to meet often during Coffee Mornings and Monday Morning Lectures, travel was easy and our docents led several tours a day in museums teeming with people. Today, most of our activities are online, we see each other on Zoom more than in person, and our members are scattered all over the world. Yet, some things stay the same. The dedication of our volunteers, support of our members, and the spirit of FOM endures.

I feel fortunate to have met and worked with some exceptional individuals over these last three years. Together, we launched the *FOM Cares, Asian Art and History for Museum Enthusiasts* programme, the *Arm Chair Travel* series, and the *Museums Around the World with FOM* series; initiated training for two new venues, *Changi Chapel and Museum* and *Fort Siloso*; and resumed regular docent training with a hybrid model of virtual and in-person sessions. Owing to these and many other activities and events, we have managed to maintain the vibrancy of FOM. I offer my sincere thanks to each volunteer, docent and leadership team member for your extraordinary support throughout.

In addition, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the current and past council members for their steadfast support. Their hard work and selfless contributions for the cause of FOM are inspiring. The experience of serving with these dedicated people in an atmosphere of mutual respect, friendship and teamwork is something that I will cherish forever. A special word of thanks to all FOM members and partner organisations for their engagement and support.

This edition of the magazine will be the last to be helmed by Andra Leo as its Managing Editor. Many thanks to Andra for her long service and immense contribution to FOM's *PASSAGE* magazine.

Looking forward to 2022 and the gradual reopening of Singapore and the world; the future looks bright. FOM will have a new president and council who will lead the organisation to greater heights. Do show your support and vote for them via the post. Also, remember to register and attend the Annual General Meeting scheduled for 8 December on Zoom. It is not only a chance to meet the new council virtually, but also an opportunity to share your appreciation for the outgoing council members.

Thank you once again for giving me the privilege and honour of representing FOM over these past few years. I wish you all a very Happy Deepavali, Happy Hanukkah and Merry Christmas!

Sincerely yours,



Garima G Lalwani
FOM President 2021





PASSAGE

A publication of
Friends of the Museums Singapore

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MCI (P) 050/12/2020
ISSN 1793-8619
UEN: T04SS0218E

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Welcome PASSAGE

President's Letter

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Features

Sketchbook: Singapore Pioneers <i>by Yusoff Abdul Latiff</i>	2
ArteFact: Unassuming Beauty <i>by Flavia Junqueira</i>	4
Museum Watch: Chau Chak Wing Museum, Sydney, Australia <i>by Margaret White</i>	5
Are You Cuckoo? <i>by Rob Arnold</i>	6
Japanese Culture <i>by Margaret White</i>	8
Alea Jacta Est! Let's Roll the Dice at the ACM! <i>by Caroline Carfantan</i>	10
Short Weapons of the Malay Archipelago <i>by Noor Azlina Yunus</i>	12
Hang Buom Street, Hanoi <i>by Linda Mazur</i>	14
Once Upon a Time in Little India: Through Artists' Lenses <i>by Tang Siew Ngoh</i>	16
The Origins & Factors for the Prevalence of Betel Chewing in Asia <i>by Nilofar Iyer</i>	18
Have Camera Will Travel <i>by Lester V Ledesma</i>	20
The Float: An Appreciation <i>by Amanda Jaffe</i>	22
Singapore's Church with a Hidden Past <i>by Darlene D Kasten</i>	23
What I Did During the Circuit Breaker of 2020 <i>by Jerome Teo</i>	24
Singapore's Lighthouses <i>by Angela Echanove</i>	25
When the World Gives You Lemons <i>by Patricia Bjaaland Welch</i>	26
Island Notes <i>by Darly Furlong</i>	29

FOM Member Activities

Japanese Docents	27
Textile Enthusiasts Group	27
Monday Morning Lectures	28
FOM Cares	29
Explore Singapore!	30
Coordinators Contact List	31

Museum Information and Exhibitions

Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM)	32
Gillman Barracks (GB)	32
Indian Heritage Centre (IHC)	32
Malay Heritage Centre (MHC)	32
National Museum of Singapore (NMS)	32
NUS Museum, NUS Centre for the Arts	32
Peranakan Museum (TPM)	33
Singapore Art Museum (SAM)	33
STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery	33
Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH)	33

On the Cover: *Rigour* by Keerat Kaur, 2021. Digital illustration commissioned by the Indian Heritage Centre.

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 or contact the FOM office.

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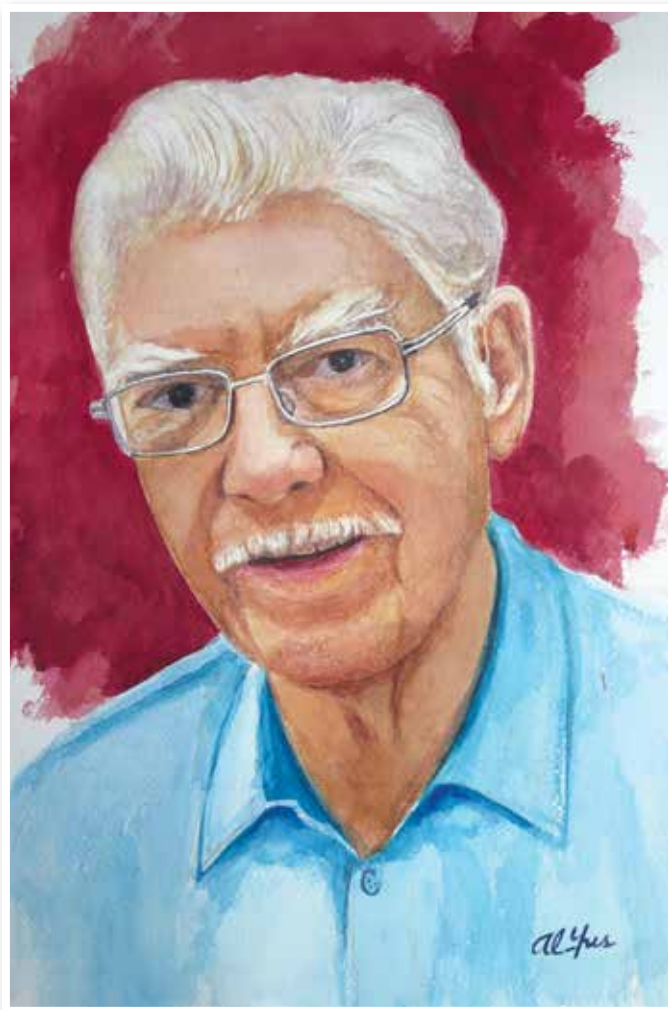
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Singapore Pioneers

By Yusoff Abdul Latiff



This is Bruno Wildermuth, the Swiss transport consultant who in 1980 convinced the Singapore government to introduce an MRT instead of an all-bus transport system, which had been proposed by a Harvard team and had the support of at least two ministers. He also established TransitLink, the world's first integrated ticketing system linking bus and train services. He stayed on in Singapore after he retired several decades ago.

The MRT began its first service in November 1987. Critical of the frequent breakdowns that used to occur, he pointed out that the signalling system should have been replaced after 15 years, that is in 2002, yet after a delay of almost 15 years, action was taken only in 2016 and completed in 2018. Today we seldom hear of breakdowns caused by the signalling system. Having lived here since 1972, Wildermuth, 82, is one of a handful of foreigners who made decisive contributions to Singapore's development. They include economist Albert Winsemius, historian Mary Turnbull, trade unionist Tom Elliott, and archaeologist John Miksic. Perhaps an MRT station could be named after him. The nearest one to his residence is the forthcoming Marine Terrace station.



While enjoying *teh tarik* and *roti prata* in the restaurant at the corner of Jalan Pinang and North Bridge Road, I have frequently gazed at the carcass of the boarded off, ruined shophouse across the road and have wondered who its owner/inheritor was. In 2019, the dilapidated remains were demolished and a majestic three-storey structure in a distinctive shade of white was built on the site, perhaps to replicate the original building's grandeur.

Hidayah Amin, the prolific writer whose book *Leluhur: Singapore's Kampong Gelam* recently won the NUS 2021 Singapore History Prize, revealed that the shophouse was

bought in the 1900s by her great grandfather, Haji Yusoff Mohd Noor, better known as Haji Yusoff Tali Pinggang. *Tali pinggang* refers to the belt cum wallet that he made a fortune from, selling it to Haj pilgrims to secure their cash at a time when credit cards and safe deposit boxes were unknown. This enabled him to acquire *Gedung Kuning* (Yellow Mansion) at Sultan Gate and this shophouse. The ground floor level was his shop, his first wife's residence was on the second, and the third floor was his workshop. Sadly, the shophouse was gutted by fire in the 1980s.

Hidayah did a lot of the necessary investigative work to enable her uncle, Haji Abdullah Joffri, a trustee of the estate, to engage lawyers, an architect, engineers and builders for its rebuilding. The first floor of the new shophouse is now occupied by a gymnastics studio, and it seems the third floor is going to be a Haji Yusoff memorial museum, pending the return of artefacts to the family's descendants.

Singapore's shophouses are a major part of the urban landscape. However, rent control legislation in the past discouraged owners from repairing or improving them and many were compulsorily acquired and demolished in the name of urban renewal. Realising that in the course of nation building, you need to preserve your heritage, the nation's leaders gave conservation status to most of the shophouses in the city's core areas.

Built for British lawyer John Burkinshaw, the exotically named Atbara bungalow is the oldest remaining black and white house in Singapore. About 100 metres away is its sister bungalow, the Inverturret, built in 1906. Together they are now part of the Gallop Road extension of the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

You can have a picnic relaxing on the manicured lawn in the shade of a cluster of mature trees halfway between the two bungalows. While enjoying the gentle breeze, savour the pleasant smell of the greenery and let the children romp while you soak in the beauty of the meadow-like landscape. If the humidity becomes unbearable, walk into the Atbara to view the exhibits in its Forest Discovery Centre, or appreciate the beauty of the artwork in the Inverturret's Botanical Art Gallery, all in air-conditioned comfort.

Both houses were designed by Regent Alfred John Bidwell, who also designed the Raffles Hotel and the Victoria Theatre. Black and white bungalows are unique to British Malaya and Singapore. They combine the beauty of the mock Tudor style of 19th century England, with a half-timbered black and white façade and pitched roof. Features of the colonial bungalows in India as well as of traditional Malay architecture can



be seen in the broad verandas and the concrete stilts supporting the house. Built in 1898, the Atbara has a Moorish influence in the staircase details and the basement's trefoil arches. The Inverturret and the Atbara were leased out to the French. They were used as the ambassador's residence and embassy respectively.

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.

Unassuming Beauty

By Flavia Junqueira

When walking around the Ceramics gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, most visitors miss this dark and undecorated cup, which is only 17 centimetres tall. It is a real pity because its simplicity hides many secrets. For starters, cups such as this can be as thin as a chicken's eggshell, which is about 0.4 mm. That's why this kind of pottery is called black eggshell. Even with the techniques available today, such fine ceramics are difficult to reproduce, so this delicate cup is truly impressive, especially considering that it is about 4,000 years old. It was made during the Longshan period in China, by a group of people who lived in what is now the Shandong province.¹

Stem cups such as this were made of fine clay, which had been washed and filtered of its impurities, but it is not known exactly what equipment was used at that time as no kiln site connected to the production of these vessels has been found.² However, looking closely you will notice regular lines around the cup's rim. These are clues that the cup was shaped using some sort of fast-turning wheel, a new technology at the time.

The appearance of this stem cup is quite simple; its only decorations are small, openwork vertical lines made with a sharp tool while the clay was still soft. They add a sense of lightness to this otherwise plain pottery. But this remarkable cup hides other surprises. Its characteristic dark colour is not a black glaze applied over the pottery; instead, this was achieved by oxygen reduction inside the kiln, which carbonised the cup, altering the clay's colour. The surface was then polished, resulting in this mysterious metallic lustre, bearing some comparison to black lacquer and pewter vessels.

Did you notice the similarity with our modern wine glasses? Curiously, it seems that these refined cups were used to drink a kind of wine made of a mixture of rice, honey and possibly barley, reserved for consumption during special rituals.³

When we learn about the level of craftsmanship and technology involved in making such cups, it is hard to imagine that they were used only once⁴ in drinking rituals during burial ceremonies, and then placed in the tombs.⁵



The black, eggshell stem cup on display with other artefacts, photo by the author

Like the finest crystal wares produced in our time, these eggshell cups were created for the elite. They were a symbol of status at a time when people marked social differentiation and political power through elaborate mortuary rituals.⁶

Delicate black eggshell stem cups such as this are rare. They were made only for a limited period and were mostly found in the graves of Longshan's elite in coastal Shandong.⁷ Black eggshell pottery reveals that the people who produced it lived in a hierarchical society that had a class of specialised artisans, for such refined ceramics could only be achieved by highly skilled craftsmen. These people probably practised ancestor worship⁸ and participated in some sort of trade with other regions. Refined black eggshell ceramics would have been a high-value barter product for elite goods such as jade⁹ from other regions.

This cup testifies to the sophisticated techniques and craftsmanship that were available in China for the production of pottery from early times. They may be the earliest ancestors of the refined porcelain on display in the Ceramics gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum. I hope that now that you know more about this unassuming cup, you will look at it differently.



Black stem cup, Longshan culture (2400-2000BCE) Shandong, China, courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

¹ Liu, L. (2004). Chinese Neolithic: Trajectories to Early States. Cambridge University Press. p.3; 156.

² Liu, L. (1996). Mortuary Ritual and Social Hierarchy in the Longshan Culture. *Early China*, 21, p.7-11.

³ McGovern, P., (2005). Chemical Identification and Cultural Implications of a Mixed Fermented Beverage from Late Prehistoric China. *Asian Perspectives*, 44(2). p.252-258; 262.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.265.

⁵ Liu, L. (1996). p.12.

⁶ Liu, L. (2004). p.157.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.9

⁸ Liu, L. (1996). p.27

⁹ *Ibid.* p.11,46.

Flavia Junqueira is an ACM Docent who is passionate about the amazing stories behind the artefacts in the museum.

Chau Chak Wing Museum, Sydney, Australia

By Margaret White

Sydney's newest museum, within the grounds of the University of Sydney, opened in November 2020 as an educational and research facility that is free for the public to enjoy. The four-storey, cantilevered concrete building sits on a gentle hillside framed by magnificent old trees and is named after the lead donor, the Chinese-Australian businessman and philanthropist, Chau Chak Wing.

The Chau Chak Wing Museum brings together the main collections from the Nicholson, Macleay and the University's Art Collection covering subjects such as antiquities, science and natural history. This allows for many more precious and rarely seen objects (some 450,000) to be displayed together for the first time in 20 years.

The museum's objects are intentionally placed in new contexts with the aim of posing challenging questions to the viewer. The director, David Ellis, makes his passion for this multi-disciplinary approach clear. He notes that the collections can now 'speak' to one another. "It's not just art history students looking at artworks, or archaeologists looking at pot sherds – it's mixing of all of those."

Asia's material culture is represented across the collections in a wide diversity of forms and periods, including archaeological remains from West Asia, historical Chinese ceramics and bronzes, traditional Southeast Asian artefacts and Japanese and Chinese photography and prints.

One gallery is dedicated to displaying and studying the arts and culture of China. Its inaugural exhibition, *Auspicious Motifs in Chinese Art*, explores how such symbols have long inspired and permeated the arts of China's daily life, prosperity and virtue. The collaborative exhibition comprises 60 objects from the University Art Collection, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Museum of Applied Sciences and the Arts. Curator Shuxia Chen has chosen four themes: Guardians of Space; On the Scholar's Desk; Into Life; Gods; Sages and Immortals. Each section showcases objects according to their functionality and meaning but also considers the social background of those who collected and used them.

In the Guardians of Space section, I was drawn to a *sancai*-glazed Qing roof figure of an "Official on a galloping horse". Mythical animal or human figures were decorative symbols of power adorning sloping roof ridges on imperial Chinese architecture; for example, the Summer Palace or Forbidden City Palace in Beijing. They formed an outward marching procession, finishing with an imperial dragon representing



The Asian Art Society of Australia visits the inaugural exhibition, photo by Margaret White

the authority of the state. This figure symbolized a household's desire to have rapid official career success.

I was also fascinated by two sets of colourful, hand-coloured, glass lantern slides for use in a 'magic' lantern. Such slides were precursors of photographic slides and these slides, made by an Australian missionary, John Whitsed Dovey, who lived in Shanghai from 1916-26. Glass slides were mostly developed in the 17th century for entertainment, but by the late 19th century, they were used for educational purposes such as these in the exhibition: 'The good deeds of Confucius' and 'The good deeds of Buddha Shakyamuni', which were made to build awareness in Australia of Confucian and Buddhist ideals.



Roof figure of an official on a galloping horse, China c.1900s, Qing dynasty, *sancai* glazed stoneware, University Art Collection

Locally and internationally, campus museums and galleries are in the ascendancy, and the Chau Chak Wing Museum is the most recent Australian example of the renaissance of university collections. It is well worth a visit or two.

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en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_lantern

Chen, Shuxia, curator China Gallery, CCWM-walk through, December 11, 2020.

Ellis, David, Director of Museums and Cultural Engagement at the University of Sydney, TAASA Zoom lecture, September 14, 2020.

Westwood, Matthew, *Old meets new as uni museum mixes it up*, The Australian, November 14 2020.



Hand-painted glass lantern slide, The Good Deeds of Buddha Shakyamuni, Shanghai, China, 1916-26, University Art Collection

Margaret White is Vice President of The Asian Art Society of Australia (TAASA) and a former President of FOM. She is an avid museum-goer wherever and whenever the opportunity arises

Are You

By Rob



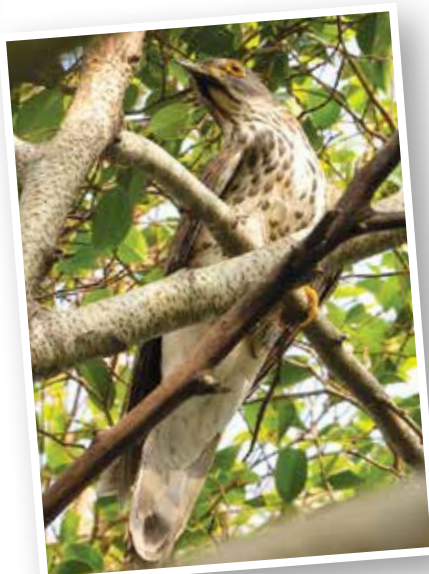
Banded Bay Cuckoo chick being fed by its foster parent, a Common Iora, as usual much smaller than its ravenous foster child!



Asian Koel eying up a feast



Little Bronze Cuckoo



A Large Hawk-Cuckoo imitating a raptor



Chestnut-Winged Cuckoo with caterpillar

If someone asked you if you were familiar with cuckoos, your thoughts would probably go straight to the migratory European Cuckoo, whose repetitive voice provides the soundtrack for Swiss novelty clocks. In many people's minds the cuckoo is associated with madness (he's a bit cuckoo), infidelity, because of its Elizabethan association with cuckolding, and fratricide, as European cuckoos are brood parasites that lay their eggs in the nests of birds of other species. The cuckoo egg typically hatches first, and the baby cuckoo often kicks the other eggs or hatchlings out of the nest, enabling it to monopolise the foster parents' food deliveries. All in all, not a great set of associations.

I doubt many people are aware that the *Cuculidae* are a large and varied family within birds, well-distributed throughout Asia. Many have monotonous calls associated with madness: the so-called "brain fever bird" in India is a species of cuckoo, as is the Asian Koel, the bird that serves as an alarm clock to many in Singapore and causes others to dash angry letters off to *The Straits Times*, imploring a government culling.

Within Singapore, there are 19 species of cuckoo on the official bird list. Nineteen! They look quite different, eat different foods and frequent different habitats. Some are drab and some are colourful, and some are resident while others appear only in migration season. Most are brood parasites and focus on a particular species to serve as foster parent. The real reason Asian Koels are doing so well in Singapore is that they parasitise the House Crow, which is flourishing in Singapore's urban environment.

Looking at some extremes, the smallest of the Singaporean cuckoos is the endemic Little Bronze Cuckoo. It parasitises our smallest bird, the Golden-Bellied Gerygone.

By comparison, the Large Hawk Cuckoo is a migrant and a member of the Hawk Cuckoos, who have evolved to mimic hawk colouration, presumably to intimidate other predators, but possibly to aid in parasitisation.

Cuckoo?

Arnold

Most of our cuckoos are primarily insectivorous and love a caterpillar. When the Tussock Moth Caterpillars covered a large tree in Sentosa, it was not unusual to see five or six cuckoos from two or three species at the same time. When they are busy tucking into this bounty, it becomes easier to watch and photograph them.

In general, cuckoos inhabit the mid-storey of forests, but species vary. The Coucals (Greater and Lesser) prefer tangled thickets and grasslands respectively, while Malkohas can be seen high in the foliage. They can often sit motionless for long periods, and the best way to find them is to listen for their distinctive calls, from the booming of the Greater Coucal, associated in many countries with luck or magic, to the descending notes of the Plaintive Cuckoo.

One feature of the entire family is their dense feathering. This means that in the early mornings and after rain they can often be found spreading their feathers to air or dry out. Many of my best sightings have been walking around environments such as Kranji Marshes after a rainstorm.

Another is the insistent calls of the baby cuckoos who, as the sole offspring of their beleaguered foster parents, keep up an incessant begging chirp, no matter how many goodies their parents stuff down their gaping, and often brightly-coloured maws. As the chicks are often larger than their foster parents, it is an odd sight.

They are varied, noisy, beautifully and variously plumaged and form a rich part of the Singaporean bird scene. Although there are several resident species, cuckoos are always among my first targets as the fall migration begins, and their songs filter through the forests, insane or not – and I'm not talking about the cuckoos.

Rob Arnold pursues a lifelong interest in nature and is delighted to be in his ninth year in Singapore, where he is approaching the magical number of 300 bird species that he has seen.



Greater Coucal, unusually not hidden in dense brush, as it suns itself



Female Plaintive Cuckoo drying out after rain



Young Indian Cuckoo taking some sun after rain



Emerald Cuckoo, the brightest of our Cuculidae



Square-Tailed Drongo Cuckoo, which mimics Drongo species

Japanese Culture:

A Perfect Fusion of Old and Modern

By Margaret White

Over the centuries, Japanese culture and customs have been constantly evolving and both are celebrated. They complement one another, as I was to discover on my most recent journey to Japan.

Nestled in the mountains north of Tokyo lies the little town of Chichibu. The rapid train takes us through picturesque, conifer forests punctuated by the autumnal colours of ginkgo and heavily laden persimmon trees. We deliberately chose to visit this place because of its traditional, silk *meisen* weaving industry. *Meisen* fabric was very fashionable from the Meiji period to the early Showa period of the late 19th to early 20th century. Chichibu-*Meisen* techniques have remained unchanged for over 100 years and were designated a *Traditional Craft of Japan* in 2013, blending the past with the present.

Discreetly hidden up a small lane, we located the small museum where we had previously booked a hands-on, *hogushi-nasen* workshop, to screen print silk warp threads. *Meisen* is characterised by its brilliant floral designs sometimes resembling Impressionist or ikat patterns. We worked with good humour under the eagle-eyed tutelage of our retired, non-English speaking master. While we awaited the results of our rolled-up fabric in an ancient-looking steamer to fix the colour, we explored the museum. Then the moment of truth. We were very pleased with our efforts.

South of Tokyo, in the former capital of Nara, we were eager to explore the Naramachi area with its many artisans and happened upon reputedly the oldest black *sumi* or ink maker in Japan, since circa 1577. Tradition reigns supreme here, with *sumi* continuing to be produced at the back of the premises. Having had an interest in calligraphy for many years, I learned that the technique of making *sumi* was



No 46 Joruri-ji, Matsuyama, Shikoku Island

originally brought to Japan in the seventh century CE by Korean artisans, although *sumi* making can be traced back to China's *shoen-boku* (soot from pine trees) in the first to third century CE.

Ink sticks are only made during the cooler time of the year, by burning vegetable or anthracine oil over pine branches in a covered earthenware container to produce carbon particles called carbon black. This is then kneaded with animal glue with a small amount of perfume before being compressed into a block wooden mould for about 10 minutes. The product is buried in raw ash to remove moisture and dried in the open air. The process can take from two months to five years for the highest quality ink to mature and age. When completely dried, the stick is polished with a clam shell until shiny and finally decorated, ready for water and the brush.

This trip was the first time I had toured Shikoku Island, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. It is a place of heavily forested mountains with many tunnels. Along fringing coastal flats, agriculture and some industry, occupy every available space. Shikoku, however, is especially popular with pilgrims, intent on worshipping at all 88 sacred sites on the 1,400-kilometre route. All of the temples are related to the Buddhist priest, Kukai/Kobo Daishi (774-835). The tradition of pilgrimages to temples and shrines goes back to the earliest times and might involve days, weeks or just an afternoon stroll to a local sanctuary. We observed mainly elderly men and women garbed in shrine jackets, conical straw hats and walking poles adorned with bells, enjoying the solitude and leaving their *fuda* or votive slips



Hiraoka Festival



Meisen Dyeing workshop, Chichibu

and collecting shrine stamps in their *goshuincho* temple book along the way.

Our accompanying friends have completed most of the pilgrimage journeys in Japan but not the Shikoku route, so we spent one day doing a mini-pilgrimage, enjoying the beautiful warm weather and the sense of peace and timelessness at each temple. Down a quiet country lane lay Jururi-ji temple. I loved its ancient, 1,000-year-old juniper trees, their trunks encircled by small statues of *jizo* by the nearby lotus pond. They represent Japanese bodhisattvas whose main role is to protect children and the souls of children who died, as well as unborn babies.

Basing ourselves in Osaka for some days enabled exploration of this huge and sprawling city, which is divided by the Yodogawa River. Cyclists, taking advantage of the flat terrain, were everywhere. On one foray, we discovered the Namba area and the Doguya-suji arcade which specialises in kitchen and culinary paraphernalia. Here, locals with baskets slung over arms, were busily choosing from piles of precariously balanced wares. We were amazed at the sheer diversity of products – *noren* curtains, shop lanterns, shop signs, stools, knives, bamboo steamers, lacquerware and *shokuhin sampuri* or plastic replicas of food, which advertise menus in the street displays of restaurants. Surprisingly, the crafting of replica food developed in the Showa period



Jizo

(1926-1989), making it easy for patrons to order without the use of menus, which were uncommon in Japan at that time. Initially, replica food was made from paraffin wax, but it was supplanted in the mid-1980s by polyvinyl chloride. The manufacturers fiercely guard trade secrets, and the craft is still regarded as an art.

A definite highlight of this journey was the Hiraoka Festival, a short train ride from Osaka. It is rated as the biggest autumn festival in Osaka. This proved to be a fantastic day as we joined the thousands of people attending from surrounding districts. On the slope leading up to the temple there was a multitude of small stalls selling food, offering games of chance, toys and even tiny fish and turtles in shallow containers to be carried home in plastic bags. There were few foreign visitors, but we were welcomed into the throng and even given shrine (*hapi*) jackets to don amidst many smiles and laughter.

The centrepiece of the day was the long procession of 23 portable shrine or *taisho* floats, each representing a district. The floats, which look a little like futon *daiko* or burgundy-coloured tiers of mattresses, and padded drum stands stacked upon each other. They were richly and elaborately decorated with ceremonial white silk tassels, giant knots embellished with gold and silver trapunto-style embroidery.



Worship on the pilgrimage route, Shikoku Island

About 20 straining and sweating men and boys, dressed in their guild jackets, carried each float, urged on by drummers perched high on the floats amid encouraging shouts from the crowd. Slowly, they hauled their floats up through the steep streets of the small town, over the rail line with frequent stops for passing trains, towards the shrine on the hill about one kilometre away. I thought a few ashen-faced men might collapse under the strain. Eventually, each float 'parked' on the cobbled space at the bottom of the temple steps and everyone sat down – relieved, hungry and thirsty.

We remained into evening when the climax of the festival saw each float, now lit with lanterns, once again shouldered high, to make their way down the hill in time with deep, rhythmic, drumbeats. One could feel the electric atmosphere as the first two-tonne float began to move slowly down the hill. Just when we thought we had seen the last of it, the bearers turned the float around and ran back up the steep incline. Most floats repeated this action two or three times even though everyone must have been totally exhausted. Absolutely amazing!

All sketches and photos by the author.

Alea Jacta Est! Let's Roll the Dice at the ACM!

By Caroline Carfantan

Recently I discovered that one of the side effects of the pandemic and its related circuit breakers around the world was a considerable growth in the sales of the boardgames. Why? Probably because through the ages, they have always been a pastime for the young and not so young. With the new normal, playing in small groups became a recreational activity. It had the benefit of providing the missing social and communal experience and was a welcome break during these tumultuous times.

Board games are not a modern leisure time invention. Archaeological finds at Mohenjodaro (in present-day Pakistan) revealed that the Harappan people – an Indus Valley civilisation – were probably among the earliest communities to roll the dice. So, it is no surprise either that one of the oldest known warnings against gambling can be traced to an Indian text, the *Gamester's Lament* from the *Rig Veda*. This was a warning ignored by the Pandava prince who in the *Mahabharata* is said to have lost everything, including his kingdom, in a game of dice.

But playing board and dice games was and is not only about gambling. A vase dated to 540-530 BCE, from the Vatican Museum in Rome, shows two black figures playing a board game. The figures are believed to be Achilles and Ajax. The Homeric heroes are bent over a table, concentrating. Researchers believe that the artist, Exekias, who was probably one of the most insightful black-figure artists, might have used the board game as an allegory about the personal rivalry between the two Greek heroes of the Trojan War, facing each other on another battleground during a period of amnesty.

In the ninth century, the sailors on the vessel that sank off Belitung, known today as The Tang Shipwreck, were probably rolling their dice during a lull, waiting for the winds to rise. I am always amazed that the team of marine archaeologists managed to retrieve a 1,200-year-old bone dice



When gods play dice: Shiva and Parvati playing chaupar, folio from a 17th century Rasamanjari series, courtesy of www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37942

(the earliest to be found in a shipwreck) from the sand among the remains of a wreck, while I have struggled to recover a tiny Playmobil piece from a Hoover bag. Only people with young children would understand such a quest. But finding a dice at the bottom of the sea is apparently not uncommon... two large ones were found in the 13th century Pulau Buaya wreck, while the late 17th century Vung Tau wreck had at least 16 of them on board.

What game were the sailors playing? Was it backgammon? A game found recently at the Shahr-i-Sokhta site (also known as the 'Burnt City') consisted of a rectangular ebony board and a dice dating back to at least 1800 BCE, which seems to indicate that backgammon was played in eastern Iran.

One of my favourite artefacts in the ACM collection is a 19th century CE rock crystal *chaupar* set with its embroidered cloth cut in the shape of a cross. Each arm of the cross is divided into three columns and each column is divided into eight squares. Its oblong ivory dice have only four sides. However, as with the more common form of a cubed dice, the spots on opposite sides are arranged so that they always add up to seven. This set evokes so many images in my mind. It reminds me of



Bone dice and acorn-shaped ivory game pieces from the Belitung shipwreck



18th century Chinese wei qi set. Image courtesy of www.roots.gov.sg/collection-landing/listing/1323505. Note that the figurines' locations differ in the image and in the museum setup – bishop and knight have been switched. And in the V&A collection, the pieces knight, bishop, king and queen are 'identified' differently according to their position.¹

endless rainy afternoons in Brittany where we played Ludo (a modern re-interpretation of the game) as a family. Or a folio in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection from a 17th century CE Rasamanjari Series of Shiva and Parvati playing *chaupar*. It depicts the moment when Parvati realises that her husband has cheated. Her intense look and extended hand unmistakably state that she wants her stake returned – the necklace in Shiva's hand. I rather like the thought that even for a god, a game of dice is beyond his control and for us mere mortals is as unpredictable as life itself.

Another game with roots in India, dating back to the sixth century CE, made headlines during the pandemic – chess. This was not because everyone suddenly became a master of this complex game, but because most of us watched the Netflix hit *The Queen's Gambit*. The film, based on Walter Tevis' novel, owes its name to one of the oldest known openings in chess. Was this the opening used by players of the John Company chess set on display in the Trade gallery? John Company was the informal name given to the East India Company (EIC). For chess figurines such as those in this ivory set, it was not uncommon for the artists to turn to

military conflicts for inspiration. The chess pieces are facing each other. The EIC sepoys are armed with bayonets, while the opposing Indian troops are holding swords and shields. On both sides, royal figures such as rajahs are mounted on elephants. This shows that the kings enjoyed the luxury of a covered howdah. In the corner, the rooks are shaped like miniature three-tiered turrets with each one featuring a sentry proudly holding a flag. But unlike those in European sets, the bishops are represented by goats on one side and zebus on the other.

If you start looking for them, you will see board games in nearly every gallery of the museum. The Scholars Gallery hosts the ancient Chinese game of *wei qi*, thought to be the oldest game still played in its original form. It is believed to date back to the Shun emperor (2255-2206 BCE). This game plays a pivotal role in more than one Chinese legend. One of my favourites is the tale of a young lumberjack by the name of Wang Zhi. One day, he watches two older men playing *wei qi* in the shade of a grotto. He is so absorbed by their game that he totally loses track of time. When he walks back to his village, everything has changed. He does not recognise a single person. His house is in ruins. Totally perplexed, he asks a passerby if this is the woodcutter Wang's house, only to be told that a hundred years ago a person by that name used to live there, leaving poor Wang Zhi with the realisation that he had been watching the *wei qi* game for an entire century.

Maybe it is this ability to lose oneself in a board game for a while that has made board games so popular over the past year.

Caroline Carfantan is a French FOM docent who played more board games with her family during the lockdowns than at any other time.



18th or 19th century India, ivory John Company chess set, courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

¹ <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O455143/chess-set-unknown/?carousel-image=6>

Short Weapons of the Malay Archipelago

By Noor Azlina Yunus



Fig 1. A small, graceful badek, probably made for a woman, encased in a simple wood sheath, the pistol-grip hilt carved in the sulur bayung (creeper) motif

The trajectory of weapons in the Malay Archipelago, which today encompasses Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines, has passed from swords through daggers to knives. The *keris* is undoubtedly the best-known traditional dagger of the region. A thrusting weapon of Javan origin designed for close combat, it is distinctive for the asymmetrical shape of its narrow sinuous or straight double-edged blade containing beautiful damascene-like patterns forged from iron ore and nickel, and its artistic hilt and sheath, the latter topped by a broad curved handle usually made from high-quality wood. The *keris* is esteemed as a former combat weapon of last resort, spiritual object, sacred heirloom, cultural symbol and ceremonial accessory.

In contrast to the highly regarded *keris*, whole categories of relatively heavy daggers, choppers and knives have been devised and used in the archipelago for everyday purposes, such as cutting, chopping and slashing rather than thrusting, although it was not uncommon for some to be used when necessary for defensive purposes. These all-purpose weapons have long-defied systematic classification because of disagreement among different regions over the names and characteristics of each, but include such items as the *beladau*, *golok*, *jembiah*, *kelewang*, *parang* and *mandau*. Most have a single cutting edge, either straight or slightly convex, and many are worn in a sheath attached to a waist belt.

Of particular interest to me is another category of weapon – short, sheathed daggers – which have received far less attention than the *keris* but share some of the same characteristics. Designed as trusty tools as well as useful offensive weapons, these short daggers, like the *keris*, consist of three parts – blade, hilt and sheath – and like the *keris* their parts are often objects of art, albeit on a smaller scale. While the single-edged metal blades of these short daggers, each with an integral bolster, usually lack the patterning of metal alloy decoration (*pamor*) of the double-edged *keris* blade, their hilts and sheaths are often carved in meticulous detail and made from a variety of materials, including wood, ivory, bone, horn and metal. Four types are considered below.

Native to coastal southern Sulawesi but widely made and used throughout the Malay Archipelago in a variety of shapes and sizes according to region and ethnic group, the *badek* (or *badik*) is a generally straight single-edged metal

dagger 20–40 cm long with a taper at the end. Like the *keris*, the shape of the blade is asymmetric and the hilt is made of wood, ivory or horn in the shape of a 45–90 degree pistol grip, often decorated with carvings. The sheath is made of the same materials, its ends also carved. Apart from serving domestic purposes, in the olden days the *badek* was considered a handy weapon for self-defence by both men and women as it was easily concealed in the folds of a sarong, with the hilt accessible to the favoured hand. It also featured in old charms and shaman's rituals. In the rather delicate example shown here, probably made for a woman, the sheath and hilt are made of the same wood, the hilt carved into the shape of a *sulur bayung* (creeper) motif (Fig 1).

Of Sumatran origin and popular among the Malays of Negeri Sembilan on the Malay Peninsula is the *tumbuk lada*,



Fig 2a, b Two tumbuk lada with wood sheaths. (a) The blade of this weapon is engraved with Quranic script. The hilt and sheath are made of a dark striped wood, the sheath encased at the top and bottom with silver decorated in repousse work with vegetal scrolls, with simple silver bands in between. The hilt has the typical rounded protrusion at the throat, here seemingly in the form of a hanging fruit. (b) The sheath and hilt of this fine tumbuk lada are made of high-quality wood with a shiny patina, the sheath enhanced with embossed silver bands, the hilt in the shape of a parrot head with inset ivory and ebony eyes



Fig 3. The throat protrusion and hilt of this wood-sheathed tumbuk lada are finely carved with tiers of leaf-like patterns. Incised on the sheath are three rows of the triangular pucuk rebung (bamboo shoot) motif

a short dagger with a single-edged blade that curves from its wide base along its 22–28 cm length to a sharp point. Some iron blades exhibit patterns typical of *pamor* or are engraved with Quranic script. The *tumbuk lada*'s English translation, 'pepper crusher', is a misnomer as it was a popular cutting implement. Its shape also suggests it was a favourite stabbing or prodding weapon, purportedly aimed at the chest, in which case its original name may have been *tumbuk dada*. Like the *keris*, the *tumbuk lada* has a pistol-grip hilt that aids in stabbing.

The sheaths of the samples shown here are made of finely grained wood and ivory, some silver plated on different sections and/or enhanced with embossed silver bands (Fig 2a, b). A distinctive feature is the roundish protrusion extending from the throat of the sheath, some resembling a hanging fruit. These throat sections and their matching hilts are often finely carved with tiers of intricate patterns (Fig 3). Evidence of the *tumbuk lada*'s Sumatran origin is the parrot-head hilt that appears on many of them, similar to that



Fig 5a, b. Rencong Aceh and Sewar. (a) This rencong Aceh has fittings fully encased with silver sheeting, including its distinctive inverted L-shaped hilt. Floral motifs are embossed on the sheath and hilt, some inside triangular pucuk rebung, while the periphery of the sheath is outlined with a hatched design. The brass blade has a decorative feature near the base of the front edge similar to the *belalai gajah* (elephant's trunk) found on *keris*. (b) The sheath and hilt of this sewar are made from elephant ivory decorated with embossed silver bands. The sturdy blade has the typical single sharp edge and flat top edge



Fig 4a, b. Two ivory tumbuk lada. (a) The sturdy blade of this fine example is made of brass. The throat extension and sheath end, as well as the hilt, are expertly carved with pierced-through floral motifs, the hilt in the form of a flattish parrot head. The sheath is further decorated with silver alloy bands and tiny silver wire hoops forming the pucuk rebung motif.

(b) This beautiful example has Quranic script engraved with copper inlay on the blade and copper fittings with tiny wire hoops and bands on the ivory sheath. The hilt and throat extension are finely carved, the hilt in the shape of a bulbous parrot head

found on some Sumatran *keris* (Fig 4a, b; see also Fig 2b). It is likely that these beautiful examples were worn as ceremonial accessories by lower-ranking chieftains rather than put to use for cutting or stabbing.

Originating in Aceh, north Sumatra, from where it derives its name, the *rencong Aceh* was originally a combat weapon but today is largely used in the martial art of *silat* or worn on a belt around the waist as part of traditional attire on ceremonial occasions. It is distinctive for its inverted L-shaped hilt attached to a slightly convex blade with one sharp edge and a thick back edge (Fig 5a). The blade can vary in length from 10 to 50 cm and its width around 2 cm. Shorter *rencong Aceh* were designed as weapons to be used by women and concealed in their hair coil. Sheaths and hilts may be made of wood, buffalo horn, ivory or sheet silver or copper embossed with low relief patterns.

Of Sumatran origin is the short-bladed *sewar*, renowned as a traditional slashing instrument in close-quarter fighting. Its slightly curved single-edged blade, sometimes with a flat back edge, is longer and heavier than on most short weapons. It rests in a distinctive sheath with a downward-facing elongated protrusion at right angles to the throat. The sheaths are usually made of wood although more expensive versions may be of ivory decorated with incised carvings and embossed metal bands (Fig 5b). Unlike other traditional combat weapons, the hilt lacks a finger guard.

Like the *keris*, the value of these handsome short weapons lies in the aesthetics of the blade – its measurement, shape and iron composition – but the beauty of the materials used for the sheaths and hilts and their various decorative elements combine with the blades to exhibit some extraordinary traditional short weapons.

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Hang Buom Street, Hà Nội

By Linda Mazur



The newly renovated Viet Dong Guild House gate, photo by the author

Today, Hà Nội's Tô Lịch River is covered in concrete, but long ago it was a major transportation artery through the city linking the East Gate of the Citadel with the port. Hang Buom or Sails Street was adjacent to the Tô Lịch River, near the wharf that served the Tô Lịch and Red Rivers. On Hang Buom, sails were made of canvas or rush and sailors could pole their boats within metres of a shop to get outfitted. Since the shops diversified and made other products, a ship's captain could make a tidy profit transporting a load of finished goods to merchants outside the town.

At different times over the centuries, Chinese merchants have been allowed to trade and pay taxes to the Vietnamese sovereign. At other times, after their visas expired they had to swear allegiance to the emperor and take on Vietnamese nationality or leave. In the 17th century, overseas Chinese from Guang Dong (Canton) settled here because of relaxed trade regulations, although the 1696 decree said they had to show respect for Vietnamese values, even in their clothing. This group brought their trade secrets and customer lists from China and moved into their new homes, paid taxes and sometimes married Vietnamese women; however, they retained their own culture, spoke their own dialect and maintained a sense of community in their new homeland. Hang Buom became the wealthiest area, with wide, paved streets, large gates, brick mansions and expensive restaurants serving traditional Chinese fare. Salt, silk threads, paper and coins were profitable exports. In return they imported sugar, brocade and processed silk products and traditional Chinese medicines to Việt Nam. Markets with exotic foreign goods flourished.

Among the buildings still standing from that time is Viet Dong Guild House (*đình*) at 22 Hang Buom Street. Its first construction was financed by seven Chinese merchants in



This guild house was converted to a kindergarten, with Snow White greeting the students. Note the wood carvings on the ceiling joists, photo by the author

1802 to commemorate the founding patron and to be used for the activities of the village. A stone stele, carved in 1801, gives thanks for the royal 'open door decree' which allowed them to live and work inside the city ramparts. No expense was spared when the guild house was reconstructed in 1908. The blue ceramic roof tiles speak of great wealth and the beautiful rooftop ceramic figurines, which have withstood time and vandals, represent the classic tales, heroes and

mythical animals of the Chinese who settled in this area.

Opposite, at 19, was the Chinese High School, confirmed by a plaque on the wall in the archway; now it is the Union of Literature and Arts for this community.

The Quan De Pagoda at 28 Hang Buom paid homage to the Chinese hero Quan Thanh De, a military general who was revered for his kindness and integrity. The land was bought in the early 20th century and renovated to suit the new congregation in a mixture of Vietnamese and Chinese styles. By the early 2000s, the temple had fallen into a terrible state of disrepair, one roof had fallen in, walls had collapsed, and the bas-reliefs on the wall were barely discernable. When the Ministry of Culture began repairs, old beams, pillars and carvings were stripped of paint and nails and re-used. You can sometimes still see the residue of the paint and the additions to the wooden beams. As Hà Nội is built on swampy land, the pillars are placed on stone pedestals. They are made from the Lim tree, a hardwood (often translated as ironwood) known for its hardness and ability to withstand the damp, since it secretes a chemical that protects it against Hà Nội's humidity, as well as termites. Some of the carvings were missing pieces and craftsmen from the countryside were hired to make new pieces. They were given a sample, a block of wood, and told to copy. No 3D printers were needed in Việt Nam. The new pieces still stand out as lighter coloured wood. Many of the dragon heads, made of ironwood, still retain their soft paint colours and are over 300 years old. On the right wall is a picture of a fish ascending the river rapids. Dragons bring rain, a necessary commodity for farmers, and the emperor would reward the carp that persevered upstream past barriers, by changing them into dragons. On the left wall is the lord of the forest, the tiger, as in colonial times the Vietnamese poets equated their predicament with caged dragons and tigers.

What's My Crime

by Trần Huy Liệu

You've bolted me in prison – what's my crime?

I love my country - Do I break the law ?

A tiger waits his chance to flee the cage

The dragon bides his time to break the lock

Just try and shake my purpose – I dare you !



White Horse Temple altar, photo courtesy of the White Horse Temple

Performances of chamber music (*ca trù*) take place here. *Ca trù* translates as tally card songs since the clients would purchase bamboo cards, which they would distribute as payment to their favourite singers. One story states that a woman named Ả Đào created the genre, having charmed the enemy with her voice while they were off-guard, so the Vietnamese soldiers could launch a surprise attack to win the day. It began 1,000 years ago but flourished in the courts in the 15th century. It almost died out during the late 20th century when it was suppressed, since it was associated with the degradation of women and many of the venues had become associated with prostitution and opium use. The musical instruments include a bamboo stalk beaten with two sticks (*phách*), a drum sometimes played by a knowledgeable audience member (*trống chầu*) in praise or disapproval of the performance, and a three-string lute (*đàn đáy*). In 2009 *ca trù* achieved UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status.

At number 76 is the Bach Ma or White Horse Temple. It is believed the first temple was Daoist. Dedicated to the god Long Do, protector of the east, it is one of the four shrines guarding Hà Nội. The name commemorates the time King Ly Thai To's efforts to build his citadel proved to be a disaster because the walls constantly collapsed. In a dream, Long Do sent the king a vision of a white horse galloping around a hill, so he built within the hoof prints and miraculously the final construction survived. It was one of the few buildings that remained standing after devastating fires in the late 1800s. It is said that the drumbeat from this temple could extinguish fires, or possibly the temple survived because of the rich clientele who could afford to construct it of brick and tile. Atop the roof are the ubiquitous dragons bowing to a golden sun. Inside the doors are beautiful carvings honouring numerous deities.

In 1896 the To Lich River was filled in, to provide more land for the development of the new capital of Indochina and manufacturers of sails gave way to confectionary shops. The Chinese traders have gone, but Hang Buom remains a hive of activity and the heart of the trading streets in the Old Quarter of Hà Nội.



Quan De Pagoda, unknown photographer

Linda Mazur has lived in Hanoi for 20 years and is still discovering new gems in the city.

Once Upon a Time in Little India:

Through Artists' Lenses

By Tang Siew Ngoh



Passage to Little India (*Community Portraits Panorama Painting*) by Navin Rawanchaikul, 2016.
Acrylic on canvas. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre

Where else except at the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) are visitors greeted by a painting (albeit a printout) of its precinct's history? The mesmerising 12 metre-long *Passage to Little India* (*Community Portraits Panorama Painting*) mural, re-installed on Level 3, is one of Navin Rawanchaikul's three commissioned installations that complemented an arresting mix of historical artefacts curated for a special exhibition, *Once Upon a Time in Little India* (22 Oct 2016 - 21 July 2017). Rawanchaikul and his team of 10 took six months to complete 130 panels of varying shapes and sizes that compose this iconic mural. They juxtaposed archival with contemporary images, not only of people of diverse ethnicities and religions, but also of places in a melange of street signs, shop fronts and the façades of religious institutions in Singapore. While a picture is worth a thousand words, let me unravel a few of the stories of the resilient Indian diaspora embedded in this mural.

On the far left, architectural drawing plans from 1899 jostle for space with a group of transient South Asian migrant construction workers who helped build Singapore's infrastructure, like their counterparts of old. Beneath them are archival images of two traditional *dhobi* (washermen) with a bag of laundry in front of the contemporary *P Suppiah Laundry and Dry Cleaning* (at Block 3, St George's Road) with its proprietor seated. Another *dhobi* is pressing clothes with a heavy iron. This trade is immortalised by the Dhoby Ghaut MRT station, which is more or less where the first *dhobi* settlement was set up alongside a freshwater stream named *Sungei Beras Bassa*.

The laundry trade also found expression in local artist Psyfool's stunning mural at 8 Belilios Lane. He creatively weaves together a *dhobi* with a bicycle load of laundry cycling past laundry hung out to dry, with other traditional trades in



Traditional Trades by Psyfool. Photo courtesy of Shunda Creative Works.

Little India, such as a parrot astrologer, a *kacang puteh* vendor (selling assorted nuts and beans), a garland maker, and an itinerant milkman, etc.

Rawanchaikul portrayed the Sikh community in front of the Central Sikh Temple (then in Queen Street but now in Towner Road) with a prominently featured turbaned motorcyclist. This is a portrait of the late Boor Singh Usma, who arrived in Singapore in 1940 to join his older brother's textile trading business. After a short stint in India following WWII, he returned to Singapore in 1952. By day, he rode a motorcycle to sell cloth to housewives but by night, he worked as a watchman at the Indian High Commission. As his retail business grew, he upgraded to an Austin car and by the 1970s, he had established Punjab Sikh House in the Rochor Centre, replacing the one in Queen Street.

Boor Singh Usma's experience is fairly typical of rigorous Sikh watchmen-turned-entrepreneurs and philanthropists. This multi-tasking Sikh inspired the whimsical painting *Rigour* by Ms Keerat Kaur, a Canadian-born-and-raised, multi-disciplinary artist cum architect with Sikh-Punjabi roots. She explores the Sikh spirit of *kirat karni*, or honest living, through this painting, one of four commissioned by the IHC for its current special exhibition, *The Sikhs in Singapore: A Story Untold*. Traditionally, it was common for immigrants to maintain a day job while balancing additional professional and community roles. The Sikh on his motorcycle works as a salesman during the day, and prepares to set off for his night watchman's duty. (See cover image)

Above the photograph of Singapore's first racecourse (at present-day Farrer Park) in the mural is the sign Race Course Road. This racecourse was opened in 1843 by the Singapore Sporting Club, established in 1842 by amateur horse-racing enthusiasts, including Charles Spottiswoode and William Napier who had roads named after them. The early dominance of horseracing by the mercantile community and Malay royalty evolved to include people from all walks of life. The races even attracted Indians who came all the way from Tamil Naidu, inspiring stories and poetry that captured the excitement. Jaxton Su Jingxiang, together with some students and migrant workers, depicted this tidbit of history in an



Boor Singh Usma selling cloth on his motorcycle.
Photo courtesy of Mr Gurdip Singh Usma.



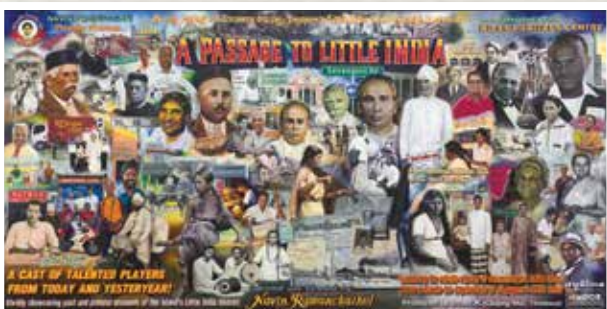
Jaxton Su Jingxiang: A Ride through Race Course Road. Photo courtesy of Chang Teck Nee.

appealing mural showing a horse galloping through a market, a nod to activities such as garland-making in this area.

Paying tribute to a major player in the early development of Singapore's port is the portrayal by Rawanchaikul of B Govindasamy Chettiar, in a portrait held by his granddaughter Mallika while her younger sister Mythili held his son-in-law's portrait. This philanthropist owned the Indian Labour Company, which not only supplied the port with wharf and dockyard workers but also free meals to all who worked there and those who lived outside. Through the 1940s, he also managed the Sri Vadapathira Kalliamman Temple in Serangoon Road.

In his mural, Rawanchaikul cleverly included the Rex Cinema, featuring *A Passage to Little India* by Navin Production, the title of a smaller mural (displayed previously at Level 2) in the form of a billboard advertisement for his imagined movie. The cast, drawn from different walks of life of today and yesteryear, also appears in his third installation, a 'movie', an hour-long video production for which he tapped on 100 interviewees. Although it bears little resemblance to E M Forster's *A Passage to India* save for its name, the artist learned the history and the stories of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and reclaimed his own Indian ancestry. To Rawanchaikul (sporting a white hat in the billboard), a fourth-generation Thai Indian of Punjabi origin, it is, "An epic journey of discovery tracing Singapore's Little India from beginning to present".

Among the cast is the late Paul Abisheganaden (Singapore's award-winning musician, wearing a black bow tie) since music is essential to any movie. He appears alongside traditional musicians: two men playing the mridangam and tanpura and a violinist wearing a yellow sari to whose left are itinerant milkmen, also memorialised in Psyfool's mural. Beneath the milkmen images are a Chinese goldsmith and an Indian goldsmith using traditional weighing scales.



Passage to Little India (Billboard Painting) by Navin Rawanchaikul, 2016. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre.



The Weighing Scale by Kumari Nahappan, 2016. Saga seed and steel. Commissioned by Indian Heritage Centre.

Traditional goldsmiths used saga seeds for weighing gold because each seed is almost identical in weight at about 0.28 grams each (so four seeds make about one gram). In fact, the Malay term *saga* has been traced to the Arabic word for goldsmith. Ms Kumari Nahappan, an award-winning artist based in Singapore, was inspired by the goldsmith trade in Little India and her home town Klang (Malaysia) to create the art installation *The Weighing Scale*. Of the three tonnes of saga seeds previously on display at the IHC, she used two kilogrammes of saga seeds on one pan to balance two kilogrammes of 'gold' bars in the opposite pan. A parallel is drawn between the scattering of seeds and the global dispersal of the Indian diaspora. To germinate, the seeds first have to be bruised, alluding to the hardship experienced by the diaspora.

The Chinese goldsmith in the billboard is depicted fashioning gold jewellery beneath the signboard of Batu Pahat Goldsmith (Pte) Ltd, founded in 1969 in Buffalo Road, the then focal point of the goldsmith trade. Before ceasing operations in 2019, it offered its Indian customers both ready-made and custom-made traditional designs. Priyageetha d/o Diayalan, in her dazzling gold and white mural, used Indian jewellery designs past and present to pay tribute to her late grandfather, a goldsmith. The intricate designs interweaving and encircling one another symbolise the act of passing heirlooms down from one generation to the next amidst the mechanisation of the trade.



Priyageetha d/o Diayalan: Loops of the Precious (off Upper Dickson Road). Photo courtesy of Chang Teck Nee.

Rawanchaikul's fascinating mural, the Sikh exhibition and street art are reasons enough for you to make a trip to the IHC and Little India to discover more about the diverse cultural, religious, culinary and architectural heritage of Singapore's Indian diaspora.

Tang Siew Ngoh is a docent who guides at the Indian Heritage Centre, the Malay Heritage Centre and the Peranakan Museum.

All images courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board unless otherwise stated.

The Origins & Factors for the Prevalence of Betel Chewing in Asia

By Nilofar Iyer

Introduction

The ubiquitous red-stained lips and blackened teeth associated with betel chewing are sported by one-fifth of the global population. The custom pervades Asia, yet it is hardly known outside the continent. Betel leaf chewing is an expression of cultural and social identity and is woven into the cultures of South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.



Sultan of Mandu, India (r. 1469–1500), Ghiyath Shah, the Malwa Sultanate, describes the elaborate way to prepare betel leaf, folio from the 16th century cookbook, medieval Indian *Nimmatnama-i Nasiruddin-Shahi*.

Since the 11th century, the royal use of betel in Southeast Asia is described in written records, which provide a rich source of details about the protocol of sharing a quid with a king and the use of betel in royal ceremonies.

From the 16th century onwards, when Europeans reached the East, accounts include descriptions of the royal use of betel, but the custom has consistently been misrepresented by early Western travellers who wrote about it, either from their own observations or those of others. The custom, so alien to foreigners, was viewed from a Western perspective. Nearly all of them were repelled by it and called betel chewing an ‘...unhygienic, ugly, vile, and disgusting...’ habit.

Even the name given to the custom by Europeans, ‘betel-nut chewing’, is a misnomer. The term is incorrect because an areca-nut, not a betel-nut, is chewed. Numerous English language dictionaries continued to retain ‘betel-nut’ as an entry until recently, but today most references to the custom are defined correctly under ‘betel’.



Areca Nut Palm, William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings. National Museum of Singapore.

Origins of Betel Chewing

The origins of betel chewing are unknown, but it is at least 2,000 years old. Although it has long been held that betel chewing is native to India, recent linguistic and archaeological evidence casts doubt on this theory. Only literary evidence continues to support an Indian origin.



Balinese cerana or betel leaf container

Linguistic Evidence

The word ‘betel’ was first used in the 16th century by the Portuguese. According to IH Burkill, it is probably a transliteration of the Malay word *vetila* (the mere leaf) which is close in sound to ‘betel’. ‘Areca’ may have been derived from the Malay word *adakka* (areca-nut) or from *adakeya*, the Indian equivalent. The widest range of words for areca and betel has been found in Indonesia, which suggests it may be the original location where these words were spoken. Areca-nut in Indonesia was mentioned in a Chinese chronicle of the first half of the sixth century. Based on linguistic evidence, therefore, the custom seems to be native to the Indonesian archipelago.



A Javanese woman preparing a betel leaf (1880).

Archaeological Evidence

The earliest archaeological evidence found so far is in the Spirit Cave in north-western Thailand, where remains of *Areca catechu*, dating from 10,000 BCE have been found. Similar finds have been reported at other early sites in Thailand such as Ban Chiang, which dates from 3600 BCE to between 200 and 300 CE. All finds, however, are from the cultivated plant; the absence of a wild species in the same area may suggest



Paan dan or betel leaf container from Punjab, India, 19th century, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

the custom originated elsewhere. The wild species has been found in Malaysia and adds archaeological support to the linguistic evidence of its origin in that area. Skeletons bearing evidence of betel chewing, dated to about 3000 BCE, have also been found in the Duyong Cave in the Philippines.

Literary Evidence

As mentioned earlier, literary sources point to an Indian origin. A Pali text of 504 BCE mentions betel. The next known reference is the Mandasor Silk Weaver's Inscription from India of about 473 CE. Persian descriptions of betel chewing appeared in Indian literature of the eighth and ninth centuries. From the 10th century onwards, literary sources provide plenty of evidence that betel was widely used in the region. The earliest European reference to betel was made by Marco Polo in the 13th century. He noted that the people of India always had a quid in their mouths and that betel chewing "prevailed especially among the nobles and magnates and kings."

Other early travellers, such as Ibn Batuta and Vasco Da Gama, also observed betel chewing in the East. From linguistic, archaeological, literary and oral sources, it seems likely that betel chewing was practised in Southeast Asia even in prehistoric times. But why does it still continue to be used in the 21st century?

Factors for the Prevalence of Betel Chewing

Betel chewing is ranked as the fourth most frequently abused substance, following nicotine, ethanol, and caffeine. The behaviour and practice are indigenous predominantly to South and Southeast Asia, East Africa and the Western Pacific. It is an important expression of social and cultural identity.

The most obvious reason as to why people chew betel is for social affability, in a way similar to Westerners drinking coffee together. A key to its widespread patronage lies in its use for other purposes, not just social reasons.

Betel Chewing and its Effects on Health

Chewing betel evokes a mild euphoria and it is this general feeling of well-being that contributes to the popularity of the custom. According to the universal classification of food, the areca-nut and the betel leaf complement each other and are, therefore, in harmony. Since the areca-nut is 'hot' and the betel leaf 'cool', they act together to keep the human body in balance. Some claim that the areca-nut is an aphrodisiac.

Betel Chewing in Rituals

Betel plays a symbolic role in rituals associated with ancestral spirits. It is customary in parts of Southeast Asia to provide the deceased with accessories from the worldly life to accompany them to eternity.

Elaborate betel nut bags were prized possessions of the eastern Indonesian elite and often depict ancient symbols such as the sacrificial chicken or cock.



Ritual betel leaf bag, early 20th century, East Sumba Indonesia, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



Five Tanggai (a South Sumatran traditional dance) dancers performing during a wedding ceremony. A tepak sirih (betel leaf container) is placed in front of them.

Beaded bags with images symbolising the ruler's power and wealth were among the sacred heirloom treasures in East Sumba. Favourite betel-nut receptacles were also buried with their owners, to be enjoyed in the afterlife.

Betel Chewing in Marriage & Sexual Relations

Betel chewing is considered a significant element in fostering both social and sexual relationships between a male and a female. It figures prominently in the language, folklore, and poetry of the Southeast Asian region.

Betel has played a role in ceremonies involving marital union since ancient times. Even today it is offered as a prelude to discussions of partners, dowries, and other necessary arrangements for a marriage. Acceptance of the betel signifies agreement to the proposal under discussion. It serves as an offering in traditional betrothal and marriage ceremonies.

The idea that chewing betel stimulates passion and brings out charm is reflected symbolically in many tales and beliefs involving relationships between a male and a female. Betel is present from the earliest encounter between the two. Ancient legends reflect the symbolism between betel and love, which also extends to erotica. Betel was listed as a necessary adjunct to sex in the *Kama Sutra*.

Conclusion

As we move towards the 22nd century, the 2,000-year-old custom of betel chewing seems to be losing its appeal in Southeast Asia, at least in urban areas. Vendors selling leaves, nuts and lime from a plastic bucket on street corners in the cities are gone, suggesting a decrease in the demand for the ingredients and, by inference, a decrease in the custom.

The present generation seems to be chewing less betel than their grandparents. The younger ones, many of whom have been educated abroad and have inculcated Western ideas, find betel chewing no longer socially acceptable. Progress in urban areas has created an increased pace of life and discourages a leisurely chew.

Despite these trends pointing towards a decline in the custom, the legacy of betel chewing remains and its use for medicinal and symbolic purposes continues as a vital part of the culture of Southeast Asia.

Nilofar Iyer is an FOM docent at the MHC and NMS and has first-hand experience of chewing betel as a child in rural India.

Have Camera

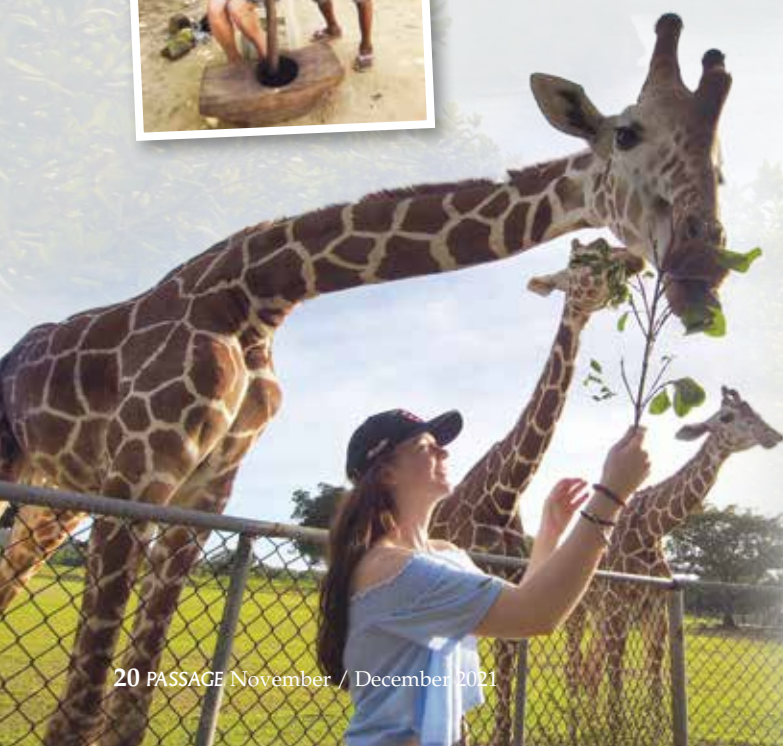
By Lester

These are the same dusty avenues, the same heritage-encrusted landmarks and the same lively atmosphere of some of Singapore's most storied neighbourhoods. Yet each time I bring photography enthusiasts here, the experience is always unique. I still remember the first PhotoTrek that I organised for the Friends of the Museums (FOM), in November 2006. As part of a four-weekend travel photography course, I guided FOM participants around Little India to practise their shooting skills. I showed them how to take environmental portraits of market folk and highlight the features of the many period shophouses here. They also learned to keep an eye out for interesting situations and to quietly position themselves to capture the best angles for their shots.

By the end of the course, the participants had earned a working knowledge of photography, and I had gained a host of new friends. Little did I know that this class was the start of a long photography journey with FOM. As the years went by, I ran all kinds of classes for members – everything from basic photography to handphone photography and even casual photography with point n' shoot cameras. I'd noticed early on that FOM folk were well-travelled, culturally sensitive and bursting with curiosity – and no matter how informative the classroom sessions were, they always enjoyed our shooting excursions the most.

This profound wanderlust was put to full use in 2014, when we organised the first-ever Friends of the Museums PhotoTrek to a foreign location. With cameras in our hands, we explored the busy streets of Hanoi. We poked around the local markets and mixed it up with the city folk while sampling some of the best street food on earth. Then we cruised around Halong Bay on a private boat – the whole time documenting the trip, of course, in bursts of light and pixels.

The experience was repeated three years later on a PhotoTrek to the Philippines, my native country. This was one of my most personal photography tours ever, as it gave me the opportunity to show my FOM friends the charms of



Will Travel

V Ledesma

my home country. With much excitement on my part, we photographed the old Spanish quarter of the capital, Manila, before flying off to the sun-kissed islands of the Calamianes Archipelago, off the northern coast of Palawan. Here we captured savannah-like landscapes on an African safari game reserve and island-hopped over turquoise waters to shoot pristine beaches and breathtaking island views. Along with photography, our PhotoTrekks also value cultural immersion, which is why I made a great effort to seek out memorable local experiences. We feasted on full-on fiesta tables with our bare hands (the traditional way) and chatted with the smiling residents of fishing villages and ethnic communities. Then we spent a night shooting stars from a private island at the edge of the South China Sea. It may have been a short five-day-four-night trip, but to this day it remains one of our members' favourite tours – of course, we all have the pictures to prove it.

COVID-19 may have brought our wandering ways to a temporary halt, but our shooting excursions continue – albeit in a smaller and more localised (not to mention socially-distanced) fashion. Since the Phase 1 Circuit Breaker ended, we've done neighbourhood PhotoTrekks to Tanglin Halt and Geylang and are planning outings to Chinatown and Little India in the next few weeks. The world is smaller these days, but whether we're shooting a nearby HDB estate or the next undiscovered island-paradise, it's that same urge to travel, that same spirit of discovery and the same passion for photography that keeps our PhotoTrekks going.

Lester V Ledesma (www.lesterledesma.com) is an award-winning travel photographer and journalist who covers the world for magazines such as *Travel+Leisure*, *Condé Nast Travel* and *Afar*. Based in Singapore for almost two decades, he organises regular PhotoTrekks for FOM Curio. Follow him on Instagram at @skylightimages.



The Float: An Appreciation

By Amanda Jaffe

At one end of the Esplanade, with its captivating views of Marina Bay, the wide expanse of the Float extends offshore into the water. Part parade ground, part exhibition space, part athletic field, the Float has hosted some of Singapore's largest bayside communal events. Even so, people often pass by the Float without a glance – unless, of course, a family of otters happens to be visiting. People might stop to admire the Float a bit more often if they knew they were in the presence of a world-record-holding engineering marvel. Particularly if they knew that the Float's days, as of this writing, are numbered.

In 2007, as Singapore's National Stadium underwent reconstruction, the Float was built as a temporary location for the National Day Parade. The assignment brief handed to Singapore's Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA) was bold: Design a massive floating platform that can support up to 9,000 people, 200 tons of stage props and several 30-ton vehicles. Along with floodlights and artificial turf for sporting events.

The result is the world's largest floating performance stage. While other floating platforms built to date had been single-piece construction, the Float needed to be modular so it could be reconfigured for different uses. Once assembled, however, the modules had to function as a single platform, able to support mass performances and events, unaffected by waves, winds or tides. The final design consists of 15 pontoons that together, form a platform 120 by 83 metres in area, and 1.2 metres in height. The pontoons can be interlocked into a variety of layouts and are moored using a detachable system, so that the Float can, on occasion, be moved as needed.

When you're on the Float, you have no sensation of being on the water. The 'ground' beneath your feet feels as solid as the surrounding land. But, of course, much of that surrounding land is "reclaimed" – every bit as manmade as the Float. When you consider how many buildings visible from the Float sit on land that used to be water, the idea of a giant floating platform feeling like solid ground somehow seems perfectly logical.

Yet the Float's one metre height relative to its area means it's the functional equivalent of a sheet of plastic sitting on water. Given this, the DSTA simultaneously did extensive modelling and tank testing in addition to 'real life' load testing to simulate the impact of large crowds gathered on the Float over long periods of time, and engaged in anticipated activities, such as jumping. The Float passed with flying (floating?) colours, remaining within, "established human tolerance for motion sickness." That's engineering.

Since 2007, among other events, the Float has hosted ten National Day Parades, the 2010 Youth Olympics, New Year's



fireworks, and the River Hongbao Festival. This 'temporary' structure has come to feel most permanent. However, even engineering marvels aren't immune from Singapore's pace of change, and change has its sights set on the Float. Barring a turn of events, the Float is slated to be replaced by a permanent structure to be named NS Square, to honour Singapore's National Service tradition. The replacement, complete with a museum, water sports centre and food and beverage outlets, is scheduled for completion in 2025.

Artists' renditions of NS Square leave no doubt that it will make the Float look quaint by comparison. That's the Singapore way – the bar for design innovation always moves higher. But let's hope that some corner of NS Square pays homage to its predecessor. Disparate pieces designed to come together, forming something strong, agile and resilient. Not unlike a certain small island nation.

Reference:

Koh Hock Seng and Lim Yoke Beng, *Shaping the Integrated Floating Stage at Marina Bay*, 2008. https://www.dsta.gov.sg/docs/default-source/dsta-about/dh2008_01_floatingstage.pdf?sfvrsn=2.

Amanda Jaffe remains an active overseas FOM member with a deep interest in the history and culture of Singapore and neighbouring countries.

Photos by the author



Singapore's Church With a Hidden Past

By Darlene D Kasten



The original St. Joseph's Portuguese Church on Victoria Street, circa 1853. It was demolished in 1906 and replaced with the current neo-gothic edifice in 1912. Photo courtesy of the Chancery Archives, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore

Docents trained to guide at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore learn all about the European Age of Exploration and Discovery, when navigators sailed under the flags of Portugal and Spain across oceans and around continents to find a direct passage to Asia by sea. The museum's Maritime Trade and Christian Arts in Asia galleries tell the story through tangible reminders of the commerce and the faith that accompanied the trade missions, Roman Catholicism.

But if you wish to see a living monument to the age of exploration, exit the museum and make your way over to Victoria Street, where you will find St Joseph's Church. The current St Joseph's looks like a typical neo-gothic 19th century Roman Catholic church. It has a footprint in the shape of a Christian cross and religious stained-glass windows – one of the largest collections in Singapore – and its Portuguese pedigree can be surmised from the front façade, with beautiful blue-and-white ceramic tile work (*azulejos*) depicting scenes of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal. But St Joseph's is unique among the Roman Catholic churches in Singapore, with a past tracing back to the 15th century and the souls and trading rights of Europeans in lands newly opened for maritime commerce.

It was in 1493 that Pope Alexander VI divided the world for missionary activities and extended the patronage of newly founded churches to the Kings of Portugal and Spain, an arrangement known as the Padroado system. The patronage meant that the earliest churches in the Americas and Asia were founded as bases of operation for both trade and the spread of Christianity. This arrangement stood for more than 100 years until 1622, when Pope Gregory XV established The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (the *Propaganda Fide*), and dispatched missionaries to minister to lands deemed not properly cared for by their Padroado patrons.

One of the new missions, known as the *Société des Missions étrangères de Paris* (MEP), originated in France. The MEP sent missionaries to places in the region, where they were met by resistance from missions already established by Portugal. There began an extended period of conflict and uneasy

coexistence between Catholic missions of the Propaganda and those of the Padroado, which would ultimately lead to the Propaganda-Padroado Schism.

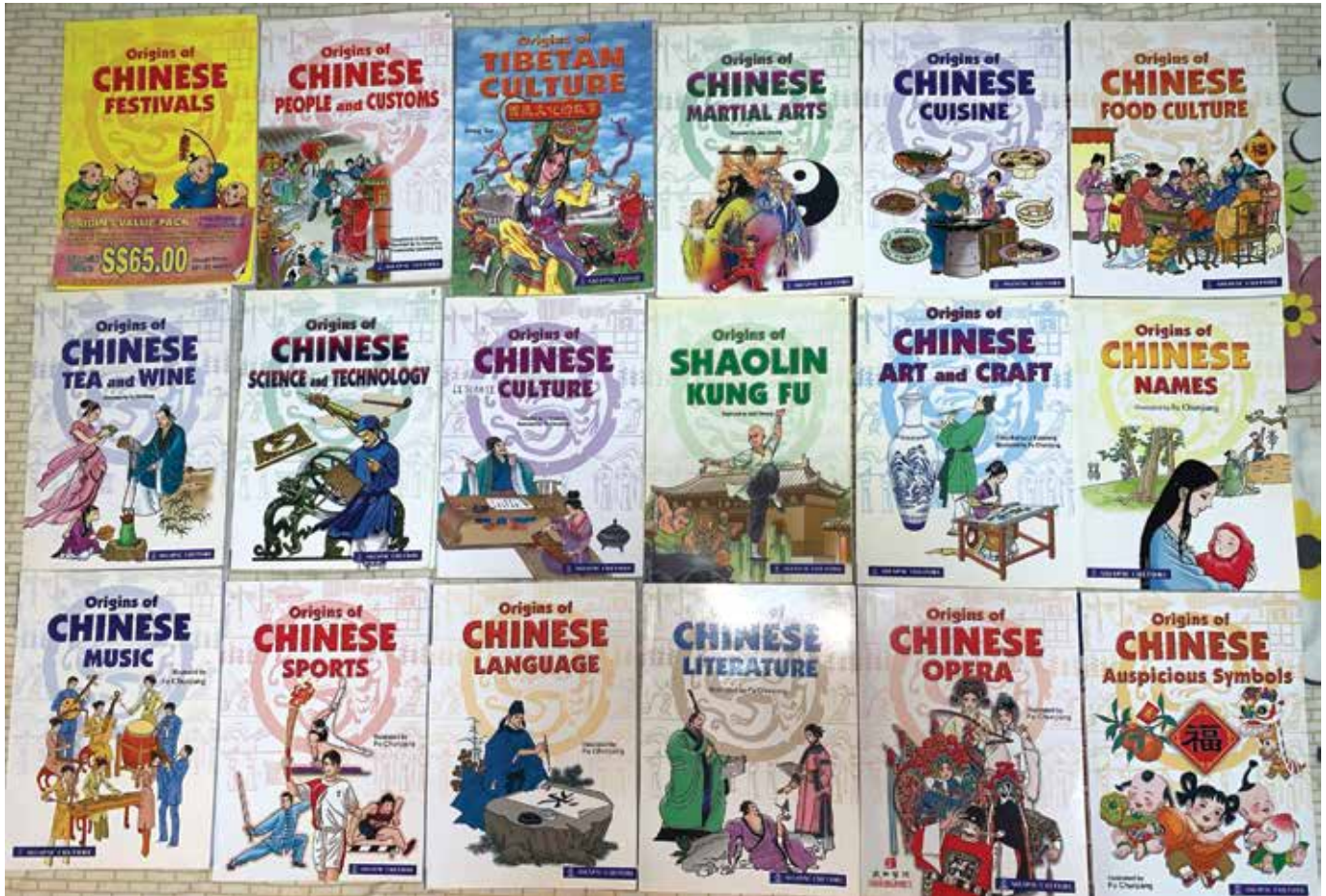
Fast forward 200 years to the early days of the Straits Settlement in Singapore: the MEP Propaganda missionaries of Siam (today's Thailand) and the Padroado missionaries of Goa each eyed Singapore as fertile ground, and each moved to establish Roman Catholic churches at about the same time. In 1825, Fr Francisco da Silva Pinto e Maria, a priest from Macau, arrived in Singapore, established jurisdiction for the Portuguese Mission, and in 1853 on land between Victoria Street, Queens Street and Middle Road, the first edifice of St Joseph's was completed, blessed and opened. In 1821, the first MEP mission to Singapore was by Fr Laurent Marie Joseph Imbert, as instructed by Bishop Esprit Marie Joseph Florens, Vicar Apostolic of Siam. In 1832, the MEP built a chapel and quickly followed with the establishment of the Church of the Good Shepherd. Today it is a cathedral and the seat of the Archdiocese of Singapore.

The 200-year old dispute between the Propaganda and the Padroado missions also resumed, this time over Roman Catholic authority in Singapore. By 1886, the Concordat of 23 June had created a dual jurisdiction. The Portuguese Mission in Singapore was based at the Church of St Joseph under the administration of the Bishop of Macau, while all else was placed under the administration of the Bishop of Malacca, resident in Singapore. It was finally resolved diplomatically in 1981, resulting in the jurisdiction of St Joseph's Church being transferred to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese. However, St Joseph's is not a regular parish church in the Archdiocese; rather it is uniquely designated as a *Church of Devotion*. St Joseph's place in local history was recognised in 2005 when the current edifice was declared a national monument of Singapore.

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

What I Did During the Circuit Breaker of 2020

By Jerome Teo



In 2007, during a book sale, I eagerly purchased a series of 12 books by Asiapac. Most of them were titled *Origins of Chinese*. The attractive book covers and the English medium had left me with the impression that these might be the books to use to gain an entry-level understanding of Chinese culture.

For many years, until 2020, the books were still in their original packaging and I never got around to opening them because I was called up for National Service duty and subsequently became busy with life in general. During the Circuit Breaker, life began to slow down from its usual fast pace and I managed to find time to pry open the packaging and entertain myself with these books.

Even though I am a Chinese Singaporean, I was surprised to find information about Chinese culture that I had never been aware of. The book, *Origin of Chinese Science and Technology* was particularly interesting, because all my life I had been told in school that the Chinese had no achievements at all in this area, unlike in the West. This book certainly changed my views. I have now purchased six more of this series of informative books. They are mainly presented in comic and storybook format, making them easy and fun to read, but without compromising on the details of the information provided.

Another book in the series that I like is *Origin of Chinese Festivals*. It provides a basic description of the origin

and significance of each of the major Chinese festivals practised throughout the year, in chronological order – from Chinese New Year to the Qing Ming Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival and finally, to the Winter Solstice Festival. Examples of ancestor altars are displayed in the Peranakan Museum, but one needs to know that they are used in major Chinese festivals and not as ornamental art pieces. A basic understanding of the circumstance of this practice helps one to appreciate this intangible heritage. My family lays a feast out on the altar for our ancestors about nine times a year, for their death anniversaries and all the Chinese festivals.

Other Asiapac series that I have added to my collection are *Asiapac Comics* and *Asiapac Books*. The former is an introduction to Chinese myths and legends as well as the origins of various Chinese deities. *Asiapac Books* is an introduction to the history and philosophy of China. I would recommend them for students as well as anyone who would like to get an understanding of Chinese culture.

Jerome Teo is a member of Friends of the Museum, Singapore Heritage Society and the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society.

Images of book covers courtesy of Asiapac

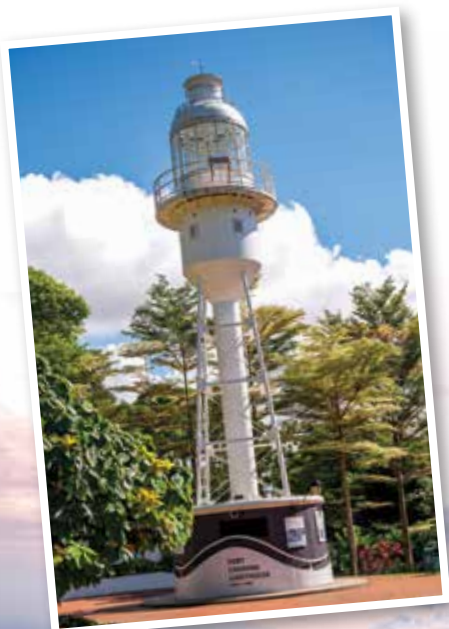
Singapore's Lighthouses

By Angela Echanove



The island of Singapore is in a high-traffic, marine strait and not surprisingly, has many lighthouses around its shores. Some are currently active and inaccessible; some others, now far from the seashore, are the remains of former ones. Go on a lighthouse-hopping trip and discover them: Raffles Marina Lighthouse, near Tuas; Berlayer Point Beacon, at Labrador Park; Fullerton Lighthouse lantern, at Mapletree Business City, Harbourfront; and Fort Canning Lighthouse, Fort Canning Park. The most surprising one, Bedok Lighthouse (still active), is located on top of a 26-storey block at Lagoon View Condominium in Marina Parade Road.

Angela Echanove is a photographer from Spain, now based in Singapore. She specialises in portrait, architecture and travel photography. Her works can be seen at www.angelaechanove.com and [IG@angelaechanove](https://www.instagram.com/angelaechanove)



When the World Gives You Lemons

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch



When the world gives you lemons, make lemonade, but how can one apply that to the museum closures we've all been suffering during COVID-19? The needed ingredient is virtual tours and online collections.

Some of the greatest museums in the world have been offering virtual tours throughout the past year and my instincts tell me they'll continue to grow post-COVID, so allow me to introduce you to some of the wonderful programmes out there: Let's start with one of my favourite museums: the **Rijksmuseum**. From the opening page (www.rijksmuseum.nl/en), you can choose between a four-minute video on why Vermeer's works captivate us (*We Love Vermeer*), a five-minute video entitled *Hugs*, or peek into the secret compartments of luxury furniture with a *Desk Full of Secrets* (four minutes). I love to go to its online collections and use the SEARCH tab for whatever strikes my fancy: ladybugs (three results) or given this is the Year of the Ox, oxen (3,394 results). Moreover, the museum has truly opened up its collection to all, as (almost) every object is digitally available for downloading (free) to use as you like – print on a T-shirt, use as your screen saver, print on a 4x6 card.

During the past season, searching in the online catalogue of the **Vatican Museums** opened its often hard-to-open doors to reveal some of the most beautiful Christian images I've ever seen. My search for Mary Magdalene turned up a number of choices, many with 360° photography that allowed me to approach closer or turn a corner at the click of my mouse. Moreover, the accompanying explanatory texts were a treasure in themselves. The museum itself offers seven virtual tours including a 360° view of the Sistine Chapel.

I hesitate even to mention the **British Museum's** online choices, as you can be overcome and forget to eat. There are *Objects in Focus* and podcasts. As the website explains, "You can go on a virtual visit to more than 60 galleries" without

having to push through crowds or find yourself having climbed the wrong staircase.

I love the *Behind the Scenes* podcasts where you can learn the most useless but fascinating facts ('How to decipher cuneiform' remains one of my favourites). You can find these by going to YouTube and typing in 'The British Museum'. I just finished watching a seven-minute video on *Why Japanese Tigers have Flat Heads*. Now I know. I also loved their hour and a half programme on the Vikings, which highlighted artefacts from their collection as introduced by various experts. If you're over 18, explore their mind-blowing *Desire, Love, Identity: Exploring LGBTQ Histories* exhibition audio tour from 2017, narrated by the star of *Killing Eve* (Fiona Shaw). Or if you want to learn more about Tantric practice and divine feminine power, go for it at: YouTube: *British Museum-desire, love, identity: Tantric practice*.

Washington DC's **National Gallery of Art** offers a range of virtual exhibitions – currently, a True to Nature virtual tour featuring oil sketches made across Europe that illustrate the origins of open-air painting; a special exhibition of *Degas at the Opera* and *Raphael and his Circle*. Their collections are also easy to search with artefact details, some with an extensive 'Overview' that are mini-tutorials in their depth and expertise.

A search of your own interests will surely take you to some sites you had never thought even existed. And don't forget the **Google Art Project** (<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner>), which showcases art from a long list of global museums using Google Search Engine technology. Search under the topic *Virtual Tours* and it will guide you to tours of Versailles, the Shuri Castle in Okinawa, the Doge's Palace in Venice, the Jakarta Textile Museum, and many more (200+ in fact). Museums await you literally at your fingertips, and you don't need a vaccination certificate or two-week quarantine to explore them. *Bon voyage!*

Japanese Docents

Spring Water in My Life

I was living in Singapore when I purchased a house in Akita. During one of my visits to fix this old house, the COVID-19 pandemic started, and I was unable to go back to Singapore. Since then, I have been living in Akita for more than a year.

Akita prefecture is in Tohoku area, Japan, and is famous for many things such as the Akita dog breed, the Kanto Festival, traditional houses, and delicious local food. I would like to share information about Akita's spring water. Here there are many locations where natural spring water either flows out from the mountainsides or comes from underground. Importantly, it is also available for anyone's consumption. I decided to write about spring water since I rely on it every day. There are more than 30 spring water spots in Akita prefecture. I live in Yuwa town, where there are two spring water spots. One of them is five minutes' drive from my house. This one has a peculiar sign carved in the wood by a *chokokushi* (someone who carves wood to create an object or a written sign). The water here is very light and does not linger for long in your mouth. I cannot emphasise just how soft it is as well. I use it to cook, to make my coffee and to drink of course. I am



blessed with how beautiful the nature is here, including the air. There is a rural migration trend in Japan owing to COVID-19 and maybe I may be part of this trend, but one thing is for sure: I feel closer to nature when enjoying spring water, which is free for everyone to enjoy.

Junko Osamur, Japanese Docent

Textile Enthusiasts Group

The November and December events are via Zoom for TEG members. Please register via the Textile Enthusiasts Group page on the FOM website: www.fom.sg.

The Textile Enthusiasts Group (TEG) got off to a flying start on 10 September, and we invite you to be a part of our warm and welcoming community. TEG was formed to support and foster interest in Asian textiles, with events for members held monthly from September to May. We invite specialist speakers and practitioners, pay visits to textile-related locations and offer hands-on experiences and demonstrations in weaving and natural dyes. You don't need to be an expert to enjoy TEG activities: as the name suggests, we are enthusiasts. Register via the TEG page on the FOM website.

Programme: *Sulaman*

Benang Mas: Gold Thread Embroidery from Central Sumatra

Date: Friday, 19 November

Time: 3:00 pm

Speaker: Dr Fiona Kerlogue

(Please note the time of the talk as the speaker is based overseas.)



Gold thread embroidery is a widespread tradition in the Malay world. It once flourished in Malacca, Perak, Johor and Pahang in Malaya, as well as in Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra and in the Malay courts of eastern Sumatra. This talk is based on a collection of couch work embroidery in London's Horniman Museum. The talk will examine the historical and social context, materials and technique.

Dr Fiona Kerlogue was a curator of the Asian anthropology collections at the Horniman Museum and is now a Research Associate at SOAS, University of London. Her new book, *Batik: Traces Through Time*, will be published later this year.

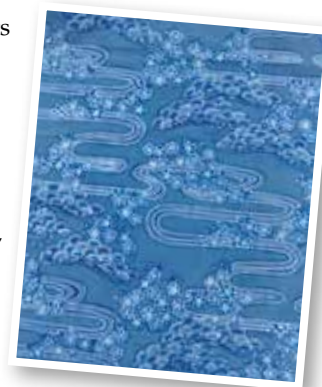
Programme: Batik of Java and its Global Connections

Date: Friday, 10 December

Time: 10:00 am

Speaker: Dr Maria Wronska-Friend

From the end of the 19th century, Indonesian textiles, especially Javanese batik, became an important source of inspiration for artists, designers and craftsmen active in several parts of the world. This presentation outlines the investigation focused on the cross-cultural transfer of the Javanese wax-dyeing technique, technology and aesthetics to Japan, Europe, Africa, India as well as Aboriginal Australia.



Dr Maria Wronska-Friend is an anthropologist and museum curator. Her particular interests lie in the cross-cultural transfer of objects, textile technology and aesthetics, as an outcome of colonial trade, appropriation and artistic encounters.

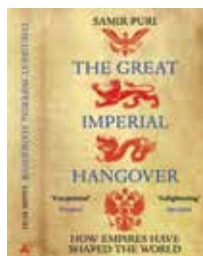
Monday Morning Lectures

Currently all MML lectures are held online on Zoom. 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.

08 November • The Great Imperial Hangover: How Empires Have Shaped the World

Speaker: Samir Puri

Samir Puri takes a wider look at empires, arguing that even as empires dissolve, their legacies continue to shape our lives. Covering the different perspectives that can arise in countries that once built and ran empires, and in those countries that were colonised, he considers how the history of empires still influences world affairs.



15 November • Ancient Buddhist Paintings

Speaker: Benoy K Behl

The ancient Buddhist paintings of India are among the finest traditions of the art of the world. This is not generally well-known as these paintings are hidden in dark recesses in ancient caves. The greatest surviving such paintings are in Ajanta. These had not been clearly photographed before. In 1991, Behl's photography captured the true colours and details of the Ajanta paintings for the first time. "You have conquered the darkness", wrote the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India to Behl.



Behl has been invited to deliver this illustrated talk on ancient Buddhist paintings at scores of the most important museums and universities of the world. His work is preserved in the Arctic World Archives.

22 November • Modern and Contemporary Art Through Lenses of the "Premodern": Examples from Myanmar

Speaker: Yin Ker

Artworks from the 20th to the 21st century and its earlier avatars are conventionally construed as distinct. They are housed in separate galleries and discoursed on in parallel fields of study. Nevertheless, if artists continue to draw inspiration from pre-modern sources, their audiences can only benefit from doing likewise. Through a selection of modern and contemporary art from Myanmar, this lecture elucidates the ways in which insights into artistic traditions and knowledge systems preceding modernisation remain pertinent, if not essential, to making sense of art today.



29 November • Re-thinking Human Relationships with Antarctica

Speaker: Dr Priscilla Wehi

Antarctica is often portrayed as remote, with unique landscapes and ecosystems, lacking human inhabitants. So what relationships might we as humans have with this beautiful place? In New Zealand, we have been examining some of the many ways that humans, including indigenous peoples, connect with the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters, as well as the traditional Māori concept of *kaitiakitanga*, which centres on stewardship and protection for the future. As part of this research, we worked with experts in *whakairo*, a traditional Māori art form that embeds values and history, to draw attention to the multiplicity of perspectives on Antarctica and its protection. Indigenous Māori frameworks centralise relational thinking and connectedness and draw on the concepts of both reciprocity and responsibility, to offer transformational insights into collective management and the conservation of Antarctica.



06 December • A New Gallery for Botanical Art in Singapore

Speaker: Michele Rodda

In the Singapore Botanic Gardens, the first artist was hired in 1890 by Henry Nicholas Ridley, the Gardens' first director. Numerous artists followed, engaged to illustrate rare native species, edible and useful plants, and ornamental garden hybrids, each reflecting the changing priorities over the Gardens' history. The collections today include more than 2,000 botanical paintings and hundreds of sketches, line drawings and photographs. The opening of the Botanical Art Gallery in March 2021 offered the opportunity to display a selection of these artworks for the first time. The gallery highlights the vital role that art plays in the scientific documentation of plant diversity in Singapore and the region, as well as how art can inspire the public to appreciate the natural world. This talk will provide a historical overview of botanical art in Singapore as well as insights on the exhibitions at the gallery.



Island Notes

The Taste of Bliss

By Darly Furlong

Mooncakes appearing in shop windows herald the arrival of the Mid-Autumn Festival. In earlier times, mooncakes were food offerings made to the moon goddess. Their round shape was meant to symbolise the roundest and brightest moon of the year.

Different regions in China specialise in different types of this delectable pastry. If you were from the Canton area, your mooncakes might be dense pastries with soft, chewy crusts. If you were from Shanghai, your mooncakes might be flaky, spherical, and stuffed with juicy pork. With the infusion of modern, innovative flavours such as durian, truffles, coffee etc, we are spoilt for choice.

Legend has it that mooncakes played a starring role even in the rebellion of Zhu Yuanzhang against the Yuan dynasty (1271 – 1369). Notes with instructions were hidden inside the mooncakes and distributed to the insurrectionist army. The success of the revolt was commemorated by eating mooncakes during this festival.

What new flavours you have tried this year?



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

FOM Cares

FOM Members Care Goes Up-Close With the ACM

By Darlene Kasten

FOM aims to help Singapore become a more caring and inclusive home and make Asian history, arts and culture open and accessible to all. We helped put that desire into practice when FOM Members Care recently assisted the National Heritage Board (NHB) with an exciting pilot programme for museum highlight tours to be given by facilitators with Visual Impairment (VI).

The Keppel Care Foundation-supported programme entitled *Up Close with ACM* is a three-pronged approach to promote inclusion. One segment of the programme is a special collaboration between the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and Dialogue in the Dark Singapore (DiDsg), a unique teaching and learning facility in Ngee Ann Polytechnic that aims to develop empathy and promote inclusion. Since promoting inclusion is one of FOM Members Care's goals as well, we were very pleased to be asked by the NHB's Prunella Ong and Tan Ching Yee to meet with the facilitators during their training in May.

There are two parts to the ground-breaking 90-minute museum experience. The first is a touch experience when blindfolded visitors get to feel different 3D printed objects of artefacts found in the museum while having meaningful conversations with a facilitator who has VI. The hands-on session is followed by a traditional visit to the galleries to see the actual objects on

display. This two-part process is meant to encourage visitors to explore their senses. Does the way an object feels give us an accurate picture of the way it looks? How different is it from the way you pictured it in your mind?

The programme facilitators and their sighted assistants prepared well-researched scripts for their pilot tours on artefacts chosen from ACM's Maritime Trade and Court & Company galleries on the museum's first floor. FOM was asked to share some museum guiding tips and suggest engaging questions to further stimulate thought and encourage discussion with their audience.

ACM will be the first NHB museum to utilise 3D printed objects in an accessibility programme. Public tours conducted by a facilitator with VI are planned for small groups once every month and are slated to start this autumn, depending on prevailing safety restrictions. The other two programmes under *Up Close with ACM* include outreach activities conducted for persons with visual impairment at the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped as well as persons with disabilities at SPD. FOM wishes the DiDsg facilitators the best of luck!

Darlene D Kasten is a coordinator with FOM Members Care and a docent with the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Malay Heritage Centre, and STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum



Explore Singapore!

These programmes are planned for November/December 2021. However, owing to the uncertainty of COVID-19 restrictions, dates have not been fixed. Confirmed dates will be announced on the FOM website, the monthly FOM activities newsletter (What's Trending) and the weekly newsletter.

A Tour of Bukit Brown Cemetery

Fee: \$40

Would you like to spend a morning in a totally different, unique way? Join us for a walk in a very special space – Bukit Brown Cemetery. Entering it is to walk 100 years back in time. It was the first Chinese municipal cemetery in colonial Singapore and was at one time the largest outside China, with nearly 100,000 graves. Buried in them were ordinary folk and important Chinese pioneers who in their lifetimes made a difference to Singapore. Our guide will share the fascinating stories and history behind the various graves. Learn about their different styles, the *feng shui* elements and other features and symbolism. Admire the graves' art, sculptures and beautiful tiles. You will have a pleasant morning walking through magnificent greenery while learning about Chinese tomb culture.



The Shuang Lin Monastery: History and Religion

Fee: \$35

Tucked away in Toa Payoh is Singapore's oldest Buddhist monument. The Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery (Lotus Hill Twin Grove Monastery) was built in 1898 with land donated by a wealthy Chinese migrant and support from the Chinese communities in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia. They also helped by sourcing for the best craftsmen from their various regions of origin. As a result, the monastery has a mix of architectural styles and has undergone many restorations. It was gazetted a National Monument in 1980. Most know it as a Buddhist place of worship; few are aware of its non-religious use during the Sino-Japanese War. During our tour, the historian guide will trace its history and enlighten us about the monastery's use during that war. He will also explain the building's architecture and talk about the development of Buddhism in general.



Pasir Ris Mangrove Swamp

Fee: \$45

The Pasir Ris Mangrove Forest covers six hectares in Singapore's east and is a conserved natural area. Join us for a guided walk of this tropical intertidal forest ecosystem subject to two high and two low tides every day. Learn about the ecological significance and economic importance of mangroves. A stroll along the boardwalks provides close-up views of the mangrove's natural community of highly adapted flora and fauna. Our guide will explain the living conditions in the mangroves and




how the plants and animals adapt to such conditions. At the end of the tour, you will have a better perspective on how important the existence of mangroves is to us all.

Joo Chiat Walking Tour

Fee: \$45

Joo Chiat, crowned Singapore's first Heritage Town, is a microcosm of Singapore with its multiracial population. The area is the stronghold of the Peranakan and Eurasian communities whose ancestries are a blend of Chinese and Malay, and European and Asian, respectively, but Malays and Indians are here as well. The variety of cultures is evident in the architectural styles of buildings, places of worship, foods, and types of small businesses. Join us on this walk through an area with distinctive vibes and laid-back charm. Be awed by the beautiful baroque architecture of conservation terrace houses and shophouses. Watch the preparation of iconic foods in traditional ways and admire Peranakan embroidery and beadwork.



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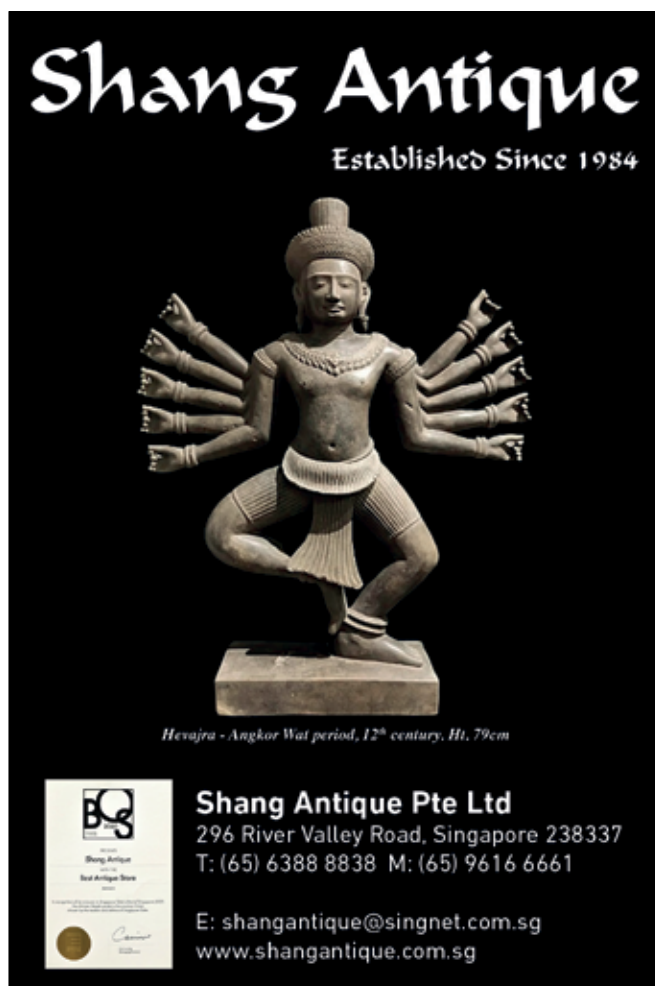
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Museum Information and Exhibitions

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

Asian Civilisations Museum

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

Opening hours:

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

FOM guided tours:

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

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.

#SGFASHIONNOW

(Through 19 Dec)

Come visit ACM's first display of contemporary Singapore fashion, exploring creative practice in Singapore in the context of Asia's cultural heritage. Branded #SGFASHIONNOW, the exhibition was conceived in collaboration with LASALLE College of the Arts' School of Fashion and the Textile and Fashion Federation (TaFF) – a result of ACM's first tripartite partnership within Singapore's fashion ecosystem. On display are cross-cultural works and fashion-forward creations by Singapore designers, including established professionals Andrew Gn, Goh Lai Chan, and Priscilla Shunmugam, whose works are mounted alongside Singapore Stories 2020 winner Carol Chen's debut creation.

Gillman Barracks

9 Lock Road, Singapore 108937
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 on-line for opening hours
Closed Mondays & Public Holidays

FOM guided tours:

For the tour schedule and to register, please consult the Gillman Barracks' website at www.fom-gillman-barracks.eventbrite.com

Indian Heritage Centre

5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924
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

Please consult the centre's website at <https://www.indianheritage.gov.sg/en/visit/guided-tours>

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) celebrates the history and heritage of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. From early contacts between the Indian subcontinent and this region, the culture and social history of the community after the arrival of the British, through to the early stirrings of nationalism and political identity, and the contributions of Singapore's Indian community – the five galleries take visitors on a fascinating journey through the Indian diaspora. Located in Singapore's colourful and vibrant Little India precinct, the centre opened in May 2015 and is our only purpose-built museum.

Sikhs in Singapore – A Story Untold (Through 30 Jan 2022)

Co-created by members of Singapore's Sikh community and the Indian Heritage Centre, *Sikhs in Singapore – A Story Untold* is presented in three parts – *Roots*, which tells the story of the origins of Singapore's Sikh community; *Settlement*, which brings together some exemplary narratives of Sikh migrants to Singapore; and *Contemporary Perspectives* which offers glimpses into the experiences of some contemporary Sikhs.

Malay Heritage Centre

85 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198501
Tel: 6391 0450
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:

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

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

National Museum of Singapore

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

Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am – 7:00 pm

FOM guided tours:

Please consult the Museum's website at www.nhb.gov.sg/nationalmuseum/visitor-information/nmsquicklinkretailvenuerental/guided-tour

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



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



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.

NUS Baba House

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

For opening hours and guided tour information, please consult the Baba House website at babahouse.nus.edu.sg/plan-your-visit

For enquiries, please email 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

This intimate museum possesses one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Peranakan objects. Galleries on three floors illustrate the cultural traditions and the distinctive visual arts of the Peranakans. The museum is currently closed to prepare for its next phase of development.



Singapore Art Museum

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



The Singapore Art Museum 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

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:

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

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

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

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



Opening hours:

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

FOM guided tours:

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

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

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



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