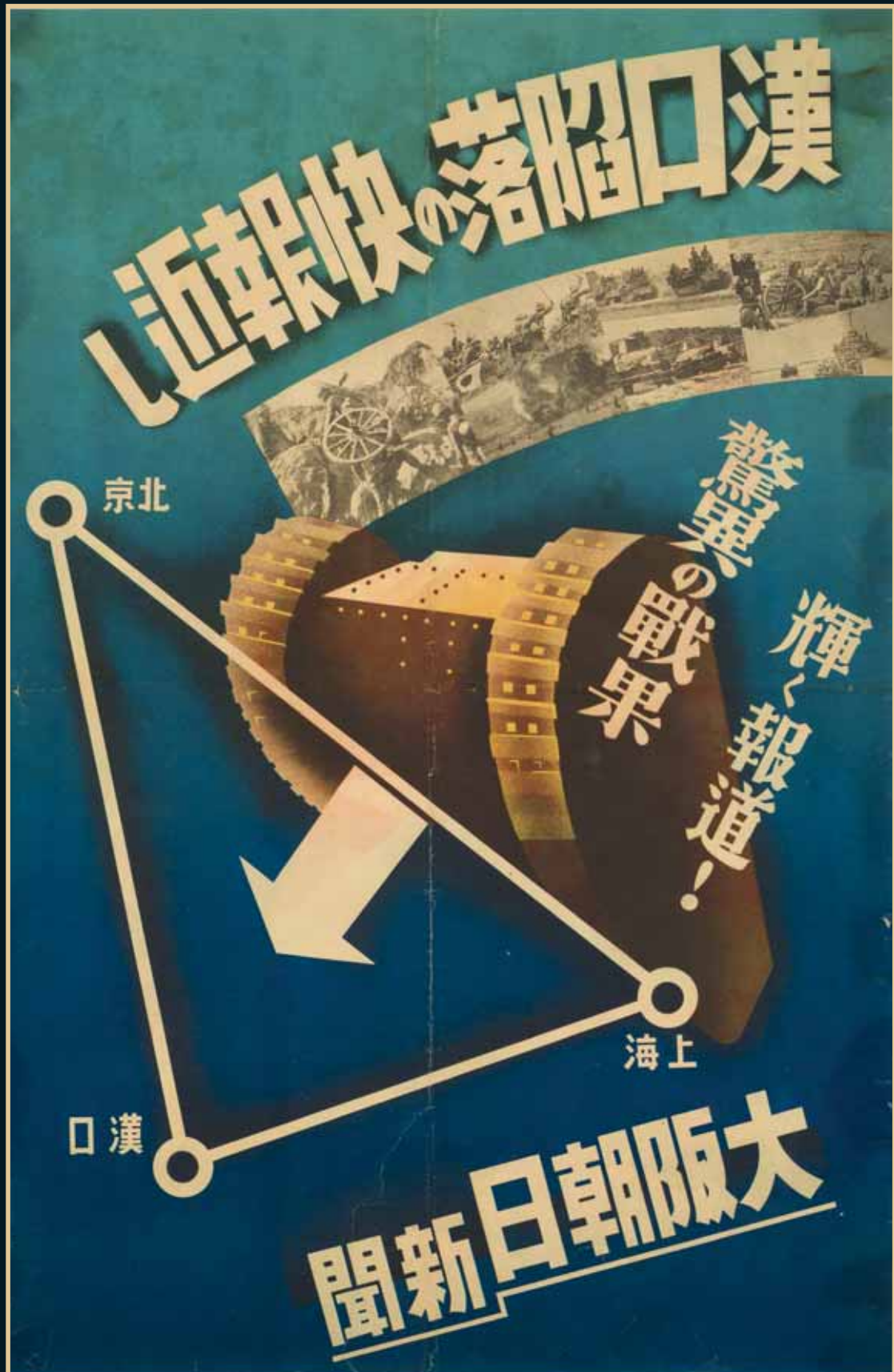


# PASSAGE

Friends of the Museums Singapore

November / December 2017



art  
history  
culture  
people



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by SANGEETA ROY

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# President's Letter

Dear Friends,

As 2017 draws to a close, I would like to thank all our volunteers for their incredible dedication to FOM throughout the year.

2017 has been an amazing year for our docents. The museums kept them very busy with numerous opportunities to guide fascinating special exhibitions such as *Joseon Korea: Court Treasures and City Life* at the Asian Civilisations Museum, *Imaginarium: To the Ends of the Earth* at the Singapore Art Museum, and *Stitches of Love: Hidden Blessings in Children's Clothing and Accessories* at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. Currently, many of our docents are busy guiding *Witness To War: Remembering 1942* at the National Museum of Singapore. Be sure to catch this exhibition before it ends on 25 March next year. To find out more about it, do read Priscilla Chua's article on pages 16 and 17 where she expounds upon the artefacts on display.

The year has also been an exciting one for FOM as we expanded existing programmes and introduced new opportunities for our members. Explore Singapore! in particular, allowed our members to discover new corners of the island, ones that even long-time members (including Singaporeans) found refreshing; places such as the *Enabling Village*, an inclusive community space for people with disabilities, and the Singapore River, where members learned about the little-known heritage of the community that once lived and worked alongside its banks. We also launched a new activity, *Curio*, which offers members a diverse range of programmes from sketching workshops, to cooking classes and theatre productions. So far, feedback for this new activity has been positive. Do visit our website to find out more about how to sign up for our members' activities.

For this season, the popular Monday Morning Lecture series will be held at the National Library as part of our collaboration with the National Library Board. This will be a golden opportunity for you to visit the captivating exhibition, *Tales of the Malay World: Manuscripts and Early Books*, on Level 10 of the library. It showcases not only Singapore's own collections but also rarely seen manuscripts on loan from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, including an 1811 letter to Sir Stamford Raffles from a sultan in Pontianak, Kalimantan.

Since the end of September we have improved the visibility of our website in order to give our members better access to its content. The new website is also fully adapted to mobile devices, making it easier for members to navigate the site while on the go. We hope you like the changes and if you have any feedback, please let us know on Facebook or through our office email. I would like to thank Gisella Harrold and Sue Ellen Kelso for putting in time and energy to refresh our website's look. Special thanks go to Ann Marie Regal and Rita Lee for investing valuable time over the years in building the website content that helped smoothen the redesigning process.

As we move into 2018, we will be celebrating FOM's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. If you would like to be part of the team planning this event, do let us know.

Last but not least, our Annual General Meeting is fast approaching. It will be held on 6 December at the Ixora Room of the Peranakan Museum. I look forward to seeing you on that day, but if you can't join us, please remember to send in your vote via the post.

I wish all our members a very happy and joyful Christmas and New Year.



Clara Chan  
FOM President 2017



# Curio – FOM Foodies Go to the Imperial Herbal Restaurant

By Gisella Harrold

In September, FOM Foodies went to another restaurant with a story. Founded in 1988, for many years the Imperial Herbal Restaurant had its home in the Metropole Hotel in Seah Street. When this hotel closed, the restaurant moved to the Riverview Hotel, which has since then changed its name. The restaurant's motto is "Good taste, good health through foods and tonics" and its cuisine is based on concepts from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Their emphasis is on less sugar, salt and seasoning. In the old days, there was always a TCM physician in hand to offer you a health diagnosis and recommend food accordingly, but today you need to book him in advance.

At our FOM Foodie outings we have *Foodie Fun Facts* sheets, which provide some background to the restaurants we go to and the food that is served. We learned that TCM dates back to a mystical sage called Shennong (his name means Divine Farmer), who is said to have lived over 4,500 years ago. He is credited not only with the invention of the plough, hoe and axe, to name a few, but also with identifying hundreds of medicinal herbs, including the *lingzhi* and some herbal teas. His findings are said to be the basis of a book called *Divine Farmer's Materia Medica*, first compiled in the third century CE. Later, during the Ming dynasty, this book was expanded and rewritten by one of China's most famous doctors, Li Shizhen (1518-1593). He spent 30 years of his life compiling the *Bencao Gangmu*, the Great Compendium of Herbs. One of the basic concepts of TCM is that the vital energy of the human body, the *qi*, circulates through meridians, connecting the body organs and their functions.

Madam Min Qian, head chef and owner of the restaurant, took excellent care of us and explained the various dishes in depth. We started off with Eight Treasures Tea (*Ba Bao Cha*) one of the most famous Chinese medicinal teas. When the tea was served in a glass pot we tried to guess what the ingredients were. Despite the name, it very often has only six main ingredients: dried chrysanthemum blossoms, wolfberries, dried red dates, dried longan (no one guessed



Foodie members trying to work out the ingredients in the Eight Treasures Tea

this ingredient), ginseng and dried orange peel. Rock sugar is used to sweeten the tea. Each of the ingredients has a special property, for instance the chrysanthemum is considered a 'cooling' item and is therefore a *yin* herb. It is traditionally used to treat colds. Amongst other things it detoxifies the body and clears 'heatiness'. The longan on the other hand, provides warm energy, is associated with the heart and spleen meridians and is called a "super fruit" because of it being rich in vitamins and minerals including iron, magnesium and vitamins A and C.



One of the dishes served at the lunch

To be perfectly honest I can't even begin to say which my favourite dishes are, but the 'Prawns with Jasmine Flower', with its delicate flavour, is high on my list. The herbal soup is a perfect balance of many different ingredients meant to give you energy. Black bean tofu with mushrooms in carrot sauce is another 'must'. And the very brave can try braised crocodile tail, which is said to be extremely beneficial to the appearance of your skin. Stir-fried boxthorn vegetables with wolfberries are good for your eyes and, to finish your meal, try the chilled honeysuckle menthol jelly. The imperial herbal crackers are an all-time favourite in my family and can be taken home together with a special Chinese hawthorn tonic.



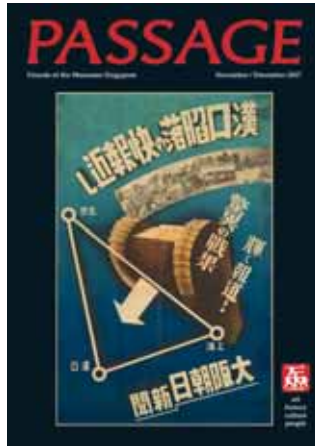
Laid out on a plate, some of the tea's ingredients

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**Gisella Harrold** is a long-time member of FOM and has assumed many roles over the past years.

---

All photos by the author



## PASSAGE

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### Managing Editor

Andra Leo  
andraleo@gmail.com

### Commissioning Editor

Patricia Bjaaland Welch

### News Editor

Durriya Dohadwala

### Photography

Gisella Harrold

### Editors/Contributors

Siobhán Cool  
Carla Forbes-Kelly  
Darly Furlong  
Anne H Perng  
Linden Vargish

### Advertising Manager

Dobrina Boneva  
advertising@fom.sg

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61 Tai Seng Avenue  
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Singapore 534167  
von@xpress.sg

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**On the Cover:** *Osaka Asahi Shimbun* (Osaka Morning Sun Newspaper) poster announcing the fall of Hankou, 1938, National Museum of Singapore Collection. This poster depicts the Japanese Army's conquest of Hankou, which was part of the Battle of Wuhan during the Second Sino-Japanese War



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 \$25 (senior) - \$100 (family) depending on category of membership.

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

#### FOM Office

61 Stamford Road  
#02-06 Stamford Court  
Singapore 178892  
Tel / Fax 6337 3685  
email: [office@fom.sg](mailto:office@fom.sg)  
website: [www.fom.sg](http://www.fom.sg)

**Office Manager:** Ember Silva

**Office Hours:** Monday-Friday  
9:30 am – 2:30 pm

#### FOM COUNCIL

**President** Clara Chan

**Vice President** Melissa Yeow

**Honorary Treasurer** Sophia Kan

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#### Council Representatives

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

# Life is a Play

By Katherine Seow

When seven new docents went to a Peranakan play, they learned that Chinese Peranakans, also known as Babas, were obsessed with producing male offspring. Why else would an entire floor of the Peranakan Museum (TPM) showcase weddings? They also caught a glimpse of the nonya's role as she went through life: from young bride to obedient wife and long-suffering daughter-in-law and eventually to all-powerful matriarch.

In *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* (Two-Faced), Bibik Bisu, played by female impersonator G T Lye, is the matriarch obsessed with continuing the family line. When no grandchild appears, she arranges for her son Chong Guan to take a second wife, Betty, and Poh Geok, the first wife, cannot object. When Betty delivers the long-awaited grandson, she becomes Bibik Bisu's favourite and very quickly gains the older lady's confidence.

While this story is set in the late 1950s before the enactment of the Women's Charter, the 'fact' that Bibik Bisu gets her way underscores the importance the Babas placed on producing male heirs. Only a community so progeny-focused could come up with a 12-day wedding ceremony with elaborate rituals to 'engineer' the desired outcome. The proliferation of fertility symbols on museum artefacts (jewellery, ceramics, clothing and furniture) testifies to this preoccupation. These symbols include insects, especially butterflies, sea creatures, birds and rodents.



Members of the cast on stage, image courtesy of the Gunong Sayang Association



Docents Michelle Foo (left) and Gayatri Thati (right) with G T Lye, photo courtesy of Gayatri Thati

The Gunong Sayang Association produced *Kain Chik Dua Mungka*, which was performed in the Peranakan patois known as Baba Malay. Playwright Frederick Soh, who starred as the hapless Chong Guan, is also one of TPM's resource people on the language. According to Soh, going to a *Wayang Peranakan* (Peranakan show) helps you to better understand the culture. The play also featured another familiar TPM face, docent Eugene Tan. He bounded onto the stage as the CID inspector who arrests two-faced Betty for the theft she was involved in.

Inspired by what they have seen, TPM's new docents could perhaps learn the Baba patois and audition for parts in the next Peranakan play.

#### Synopsis: *Kain Chik Dua Mungka*

Bibik Bisu's long-awaited grandson arrives courtesy of her second daughter-in-law, Betty. Having delivered what the older woman desires, Betty can do no wrong in Bibik Bisu's eyes. Unfortunately, Betty isn't as wholesome as she appears.

After her confinement, vivacious Betty is raring to go out. On the pretext of visiting her mother, she leaves the house for an assignation with Roy, the friend she recommended for the post of family driver. Sweet-tongued Roy convinces Betty that they are meant for each other. The pair then hatches a plot to steal Bibik Bisu's money and jewellery when Betty's husband Chong Guan is away on a business trip. However, fate intervenes; their plan is foiled and Bibik Bisu learns how foolish she has been in trusting two-faced Betty.

The Gunong Sayang Association staged *Kain Chik Dua Mungka* at the Drama Centre Theatre from 24 to 26 August 2017. The four performances, including a matinee, were sold out.

---

**Katherine Seow** guides at the Peranakan Museum and loves reading, writing and gardening.

---

# In Conversation with Singapore's Former First Lady, Puan Noor Aishah

By Ilknur Yildiz



*Sadiah Shahal introducing Puan Noor Aishah*



*Members of the audience at the event*

September's Coffee Morning at the Malay Heritage Centre was very special as we had the honour of welcoming one of the most influential personalities of Singapore, the former First Lady, Puan Noor Aishah. Although very shy and quiet at the beginning of the conversation, she was very happy to share some stories from her exceptional life as First Lady of Singapore.

Noor Aishah was born in 1933 in Selangor and did not know her biological parents. At birth, she was adopted by a couple of Eurasian and Burmese Chinese heritage, and grew up in Penang. She had no formal schooling beyond the first two years of primary school. However, the impression the School Inspector made on her during those two years was a lasting one; she concluded that the inspector must be a very important person and aspired to be an inspector herself one day. However, life had different plans for her.

Noor Aishah was eager to learn, helping her mother at home, she quickly picked up cooking and sewing and also attended religious classes, where she studied Islam, recited the Qur'an and received instruction in etiquette and morality. By the time she was 14, she had acquired considerable skills in sewing and embroidery.

At the age of only 16 she was married. Mr Yusof Ishak was 39, a passionate journalist who had started the *Utusan Melayu* – a newspaper fully owned and run by Malays. The couple was introduced by a family friend. She told us that it was her simplicity in style and looks that had attracted him. One year later, at the age of 17, she became a mother.

When Noor Aishah was just 26 years old, without any prior knowledge of what her role would be, she became the First Lady of Singapore and moved to the Istana. After only a week, representatives from the Girl Guides of Singapore and the Red Cross came to ask her to be their patron. She

was overwhelmed by the request since she had no formal education. The president was very reassuring and told her to do what she could and drop what she could not.

While at the Istana, she had private teachers helping her to improve her English and study world affairs. She also asked her husband to bring her books to improve her fluency in reading and writing, which he kindly did.

Her principal outfit when she first became First Lady was the traditional and modest *baju kurung*. In the book *Puan Noor Aishah, Singapore's First Lady* by Kevin Y L Tan, she wrote, "I realised that I would need to dress better, to put on nicer *kebayas* as everyone would be looking at me. And I would be receiving guests and dignitaries at the Istana, so I had to dress suitably for the occasion. No one told me what to wear so I had to decide for myself."

There was no dress allowance for the First Lady and she did not receive any salary, so she decided to make her own clothes. She went down to Arab Street and bought lengths of plain cotton voile, which was cheaper, then sewed the fabric into *kebayas*, which she embroidered herself. Noor Aishah had long hair, but never went to a hairdresser to get her hair cut or styled. She cut her own hair and learned how to style it into different types of buns from magazines and from observing others. A year after entering the Istana, Noor Aishah had quietly changed and set the tone for all First Ladies to come.

Her humble personality and very elegant appearance struck our members and newcomers at the coffee morning. She left us with some final words, "We women should always open our eyes all the time – look around us and learn. Always have a clean heart; never harbour ill feelings towards others."

---

**Ilknur Yildiz** is from Austria and has lived in Singapore for five years. She joined FOM in 2013 and is a SAM docent with a passion for art.

---

*All photos by Gisella Harrold*



# Ye Olde Eating House Chew Kee, Upper Cross Street

By Arlene Bastion

The term 'eating house' is an old-fashioned one, but it suits Chew Kee. Yu Beng Chew, from Guangzhou, China, started the shop in 1947 and since he was already good at making the staple dish, *yow kai*, soy sauce chicken, he continued to do so. He passed the mantle on to his daughter, Madam Yu Li Qin, who with her son Thomas, is dedicated to preserving their heritage.

Their food is of course integral to this heritage. They still use Grandpa's recipe for the all-important marinade to braise the chickens, delivered fresh daily by their supplier of 30 years, and are careful to keep the original taste of the chicken because this is what customers come for. They use whole eggs in the noodles, with each serving cooked individually. This is managed even though there is still just one burner in the kitchen.

Chew Kee's customers, many from Chinatown, are also part of the heritage. Thomas said the customers have given the shop the role of maintaining and perpetuating the heritage of their Chinatown community, especially when much of it has been sacrificed to tourist kitsch and gewgaws. Chew Kee Eating House is a gathering place where the community spirit of Chinatown has been retained, just as in our traditional coffee shops.

For Thomas, community heritage extends into Singapore's heritage. The shop is like a microcosm of Old Singapore, located in one of the country's oldest roads, Upper Cross Street. The shop's focus is on staying loyal to the past, its



*There are always queues at Chew Kee Eating House*

community, its Singaporean identity. They are proud of doing things the old way, a precious thing for customers amidst the proliferation of transient food fads and flavours of the month. Memories attach people to the shop, and they go to Chew Kee's because they know they will be getting what they remember and wish to keep enjoying, the comfort of food that symbolizes continuity, familiarity and stability.

Passion is another prong of their heritage. His mentors, his mother and aunt, taught Thomas that passion is the most important ingredient in cooking. But the shop is also kept going by passion and would have capitulated to age and change without it, evidence of the family's belief in their heritage and the hard work needed to sustain it. A passion for family and heritage is the hardest to break.

Chew Kee's authentic heritage experience contributes to the Singaporean identity. This, for Thomas, is his legacy, his heritage, his blessing and responsibility to keep up. Thomas's daughter is now only two years old. When she's old enough, will she step up to the plate?

Be careful you get the correct shop. It is *not* Chiew Kee, which is on the way to Chew Kee's. You will pass Spring Court, another old family-run Chinese restaurant, Chop Wah Onn, also old, family-run and famous for their ointments to cure aches. Chew Kee Eating House is towards the end of that stretch of the street.



*Madam Yu giving instructions in the kitchen*



*Thomas with his mother, Madam Yu Li Qin*

**Arlene Bastion** is currently a part-time lecturer at a Singapore university.

*Photos by the author*



# Yoni and Lingam – A Tale of Balance and Harmony

By Ratika Shah Singh

If you have travelled across India or parts of Southeast Asia where Hinduism was the dominant religion at one time (Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia), you will have come across the objects shown in these images, the *yonis* and *lingams*, either together, or at times separate. Many people do not feel comfortable asking what they are because it is embarrassing to discuss sexual organs in public and yet these objects apparently show them joined together, in union. However, the *yonis* and *lingams* are much more than sexual organs.

Along with other symbols of Hinduism, Indian traders brought the *yonis* and *lingams* to Indonesia at the beginning of the first century CE. They would have brought tiny portable ones made of bronze and Indonesian artisans replicated them but carved them from large, widely available volcanic stones, called andesite, an example of which you see here.

*Yoni* and *lingam* worship predates modern Hinduism as we know it. *Lingam* is a Sanskrit word that has diverse meanings and uses, ranging from mark, sign or characteristic, to gender. According to some scholars, the origin of *lingam* or *lingga*, can be traced back to the *yupa-stambha* or *skambha*, the sacrificial post in Vedic rituals (circa 1500 BCE). Later, it came to be associated with Shiva, the God of Destruction in the Hindu trinity. In some Hindu scriptures, Shiva is referred to

as a beginning-less and endless cosmic pillar of fire (*stambha*), the cause of all causes.

The Sanskrit word *yonis* has several meanings – womb, species or life-form, and even a good harvest of crops. In essence, *yonis* is associated with fertility and creation, and because women are endowed with these two attributes, the *yonis* became a symbol for the Divine Mother or the Supreme Goddess – also called *Shakti* (energy). She is the life force that permeates everything that exists in the world.

Interestingly, the *lingam* is depicted as rising up, out of the *yonis*, not penetrating it. The *yonis*, cool and receptive, stabilises the fiery aspect of Shiva and transforms him from the God of Destruction into the God of Destruction and Regeneration. Their union represents the eternal process of creation, destruction and regeneration.

References to the *yonis* and *lingam* as the vulva and phallus came much later and can be attributed to the famous Indian book *Kamasutra* (circa 700 CE). Practitioners of tantric Hinduism see sex as an antidote for desire and sexual union is considered to be one of the most powerful symbols. They worship the *yonis* and *lingam* as symbols in order to become one with their sexuality and not let it consume them, in the same way that Shiva did in various myths and texts.

In Indonesia, where the balance of two harmonious but opposing forces has great importance, the *yonis* and *lingam* found widespread acceptance. Many *yonis* and *lingam* statues have been found in temples throughout Java, sometimes together, sometimes alone.

Folklore has it that the founding father and first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, created the greatest ode to the *yonis* and *lingam* in modern times. Just as Paris has the Eiffel Tower and Washington DC has the Washington Monument, Jakarta has the Monas (MONumen NASional). You don't have to look too hard to find a *yonis* and *lingam* there.



The yoni is the spouted receptacle on which the lingga stands; it represents Shiva's wife, Parvati, and symbolizes female generative power. Together they are a powerful symbol of cosmic energy.



The little golden Lingga and Yoni is believed to be the very first artefact acquired by the Batavia Society (which went on to become the Museum Nasional) in 1780, two years after it was established. It comes from Malang, East Java, and dates from the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century. The size of this piece suggests that it was not used for ceremonies but was probably a peripih piece, an amulet placed in a container (peripih) that was then buried beneath the foundations of a Hindu temple to sanctify it. Unfortunately, at present it is not on display, since the treasure rooms in the Old Wing of the museum have been closed pending the renovation of the building.



The cylindrical column is the lingga (also spelled linga or lingam); it is a representation of Shiva and symbolizes male creative energy.

Ratika Shah Singh is a volunteer guide at the Museum Nasional in Jakarta with the Indonesian Heritage Society. A trailing expat wife, she divides her time between marketing and communication, and getting to know the world better through local food and culture.

All photos courtesy of Janneke Koster

# Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale (Rome)

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

Rome has so many classical archaeological museums and sites that visitors can be forgiven if they overlook one of its smaller, lesser-known museums, such as that found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Palazzo Brancaccio, once owned by a wealthy New Yorker, Mary Elisabeth Bradhurst Field, the mother-in-law of Prince Salvatore Brancaccio. Today, as Rome's Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale, the palazzo houses a small collection of Asian and Central Asian art, and a noteworthy collection of Gandharan art.

When the museum's doors opened in 1958, its main attraction was artefacts from the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO). Over the years, additional acquisitions and gifts were acquired, including Japanese artefacts from the Tokyo National Museum. Today, the museum has a very fine Japanese collection of more than 2,200 items, including a large number of Edo period woodblock prints, as well as a selection of ceramics, paintings and sculpture from Central Asia and China.

It is the museum's Gandharan collection, however, that takes one by surprise for its breadth and the sheer beauty of some of its artefacts. The Italian Archaeological Mission of IsMEO undertook a number of excavations in Pakistan's Swat Valley from 1956-1978 and it is the artefacts from those expeditions that are today on display.

Gandharan art features early Buddhist narrative scenes taken from the former lives of the Buddha (known as *Jataka* tales) as well as from the life of the historical Gautama Buddha. Because many were sculptures, carved in stucco or schist that decorated the sides of stupas, they – aside from some past and more recent wanton destructive acts – have survived since first carved between the first and fifth centuries.

As Professor Pia Brancaccio writes in the introduction to *Gandharan Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, and Texts*, the term Gandharan "was used to describe finds coming from a series of culturally related areas beyond the Peshawar plains, such as the Swat valley, the Buner and Taxila regions, eastern Afghanistan, and even parts of Kashmir... This material, kept in colonial museums such as the Indian Museum in



Two pensive, bejewelled and turbaned princes sit listening (to the Buddha's words). Details from a frieze

Calcutta and the British Museum in London, lost records of its precise provenance and was generically labelled as Gandharan, thus shifting the meaning of the word from a precise geographical designation to a broad cultural one" (page 1).

Influenced by both Kushan and Indo-Greek styles, Gandharan art reflects the cultural environment in which it arose. In the above-cited work, Brancaccio has a chapter on "stupa reliefs that record the



Gandharan sculpture never ceases to amaze viewers for its extraordinarily detailed clothing, turbans, jewellery and facial expressions of those listening to the Buddha's teaching.

multiethnic matrix of the Buddhist devotees in the region". One look at the diverse array of clothing, headdresses and jewellery represented on the friezes betrays the breadth of this multiethnic mix while the Buddha remains singularly identifiable by his *chignon ushnisa*, heavy draped monastic robe, gentle facial expressions and unmistakable *mudras* and *asanas*.

Another easily identifiable figure in Gandharan friezes is that of Vajrapani, who was believed to have been modelled after Hercules and is an early bodhisattva and protector of Buddha. He stands close to the Buddha and holds a distinctive long rounded *vajra* (a thunderbolt or mythical weapon) in his left hand.

The museum is located at 248 Via Merulana (00185 Roma) and is open Tues, Wed, Fridays 9:00 am – 2:00 pm; Thurs, Sat & Sun 9:00 am – 7:30 pm. Closed on Mondays. Admission is 6 Euros. Website: [www.museorientale.beniculturali.it](http://www.museorientale.beniculturali.it)



Gautama Buddha stands central in this frieze accompanied by his early fellow monks and on his left, Vajrapani, holding his distinctive long rounded vajra, and wearing a short chiton or tunic. A small boy, known as an Eros or Putti, stands to the far right.

**Patricia Bjaaland Welch** is a long-term contributor to *PASSAGE* who loves to travel and visit museums, searching out their hidden gems.

Photos by the author



# The Colours of India

By Siobhán Cool

India is "the one land that all men desire to see and having seen it once, by even a glimpse, would not give up that glimpse, for all the shows of all the rest of the globe combined". (Mark Twain)

*Goan building:* In Goa, more than traces of India's various colonial masterpieces remain. So many historical structures are intact and still in use, letting the past play a useful role in the present, as the future arrives.



*Jain Temple Interior:* The Indian sub-continent has centuries of religious diversity, the foundation of its cultural tapestry. A visit to this Jain temple in Mumbai reminded me of the universal concept that is the human soul.

*Temple seller:* One of many small traders who line the route to a popular temple, this flower seller nestles amongst her fragrant stock and smiles at the passing worshippers.




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Siobhán Cool lives in Singapore with her family and steals away whenever she can, to sketch passing scenes.

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# Buddhist Iconography on Burmese Silverware

By David C Owens

Silversmithing (*pantain*) is one of Burma's ten traditional art forms. The body of silverware produced during the Burmese 'Silver Age', from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, excels in artistic value and technical quality. It was often inspired by Buddhism. This article illustrates distinctive pieces of Burmese silver art and deciphers its decorative iconography.

The finest 'Silver Age' art comprises devotional offering bowls, ceremonial betel boxes and stately treasure boxes. Many pieces are embellished with exceptionally detailed Buddhist iconography, including narratives from the life of the Buddha, Buddhist scriptures and *Jataka* tales. These narratives convey the teachings and values of Buddhism. Accordingly, it was considered an act of great merit to commission and to craft this silverware. Burmese silversmiths rarely signed their work in conformity with the tenets of Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhism is the religion of Burma. The Buddhist stories and scriptures that decorate the silverware are all found in the Pali Canon, the oldest extant Buddhist canon. Some of the *Jataka* tales may also be rooted in fables that pre-date Buddhism.

Figure 1 is an offering bowl decorated with six chronological stories from the early life of Siddhartha



Figure 1. An offering bowl decorated with six stories of the Buddha's life

Gautama, the Buddha-to-be. This lovely piece is attributed to Maung Yin Maung, a prize-winning master silversmith from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Figure 2 is a composite photo image of all six stories in the following sequence (viewed from top left to bottom right) – Queen Maya's dream of conception; the 'birth' of the Buddha-to-be in Tusita heaven; the birth of Siddhartha under a sal tree in Lumpini Park; Queen Maya returning home to Kapilavastu in a palanquin; the sage Asita



Figure 2. A composite image of six stories from the Buddha's life

predicting Siddhartha's future to King Suddhodana; and the young prince's first meditation underneath a rose-apple tree whilst his father performs the ritual first ploughing ceremony (also see Fig 1). Each scene is a high-fidelity rendition of the biographical event as described in the original Pali Canon.

The elegant bowl in Figure 3 tells the scriptural story of Patacara. It's an acutely tragic narrative constructed to teach the Buddhist truth of impermanence and the value of enlightenment. Patacara, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, elopes with a servant boy to live in the forest. A few years later, a violent storm indirectly causes the death of her husband, her two sons and her parents. Naked and distraught with grief, Patacara is finally comforted by the Buddha who teaches her the truth of life and the impermanence of all things. Consoled, Patacara becomes a devoted Buddhist nun and dedicates her new life to preserving the integrity of the *Vinaya*, the rules of conduct



Figure 3. Patacara being comforted by the Buddha





Figure 4. The death of Patacara's two children

half-submerged in a raging river, reaches up in desperation as a bird of prey swoops down and seizes her baby. At the same moment, her first child is swept away by the river. The silversmith artist is the renowned Maung Shwe Yon (d. 1889) from Rangoon. He has rendered Patacara's human emotion and physical form with great finesse.



Figure 5. Richly embellished ceremonial offering bowl

*Jataka* are stories of the Buddha's former lives and are the most popular decorative narratives found on Burmese silverware. Each *Jataka* teaches the ethical values of Buddhism. There are 547 *Jataka* in the Pali Canon. In the final ten stories, the Buddha-to-be fulfills each of the ten perfections, or virtues, of Buddhism.

Figure 5 is a large and richly embellished ceremonial offering bowl. The decorative iconography is from the *Vidhura-Pandita Jataka* (No 546) which elucidates the virtue of truthfulness. A pivotal character in the *Jataka* is the demon Punaka who rides a supernatural horse that can fly through the air and walk on water. The bridled and caparisoned horse rears up majestically from the centre of the bowl in Figure 5. It is anatomically well-proportioned and imbued with energy and motion.



Figure 6. Detailed image of Punaka's horse

and discipline for Buddhist monks and nuns.

The Patacara bowl is embellished with eight scenes from her traumatic early life. Figure 4 illustrates the death of her two children in a heart-rending scene.

Patacara,

Punnaka is mounted on the horse and easily identified owing to the silversmith's convention of depicting demons with a masked face. The scene on the bowl portrays Punnaka leaving the demon underworld to capture Vidhura-Pandita, a virtuous and truthful sage dwelling in the earthly kingdom of Indapatta.

Figure 6 demonstrates the perfect fusion of artistic vision and technical skill. The silversmith has created a finely detailed and exquisite image of Punnaka's caparisoned horse with bulging muscles and a flowing mane and tail. The tools required to create this august horse were a simple hammer and a rag-tag collection of steel punches and liners.

The *Vessantara Jataka* (No 547) is the final and best-known of all the Pali Canon *Jataka*. It illustrates the virtue of charity. Vessantara iconography adorns more Burmese silverware than any other *Jataka*. Figure 7 is the hinged lid of a silver treasure box which has been transformed into a canvas to portray the first act of Prince Vessantara's charity. He is giving away his kingdom's sacred white elephant to a rival kingdom. Princess Maddi, his wife, and their two children are seated next to Vessantara, who pours water over the hands of a Brahmin in a Buddhist ritual to symbolize his charitable gift. Other Brahmins lead the elephant away as Vessantara's courtiers look on in dismay. Additional scenes on the sides of the box complete the Vessantara story and effectively create a potent story-board to illuminate the virtue of charity.



Figure 7. Hinged lid of a silver treasure box

What special circumstances created the Burmese 'Silver Age'? Perhaps it was the serendipitous coincidence of three factors – the burgeoning of superbly talented silversmiths; the ready availability of silver metal from Burmese mines and recycled silver coins; and the emergence of a new patron class of wealthy Burmese merchants and officials. The motivations to acquire fine silverware included the Buddhist practice of 'making merit', the desire to display new wealth and status, and the functional requirements of Buddhist ceremonies. The silverware also evolved into a store of private wealth during a long period of military conflict and political turmoil that followed the demise of the 'Silver Age'.

Old Burmese silverware decorated with Buddhist iconography is a largely undiscovered, yet inspiring genre of fine art. It's also an important Burmese cultural legacy. The author hopes this article will excite the reader's visual senses and inspire further interest in a uniquely Burmese and enchanting art form.

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**David C Owens** is a retired mining industry professional and a passionate collector of Burmese silverware. He has lived in Singapore since 2008.

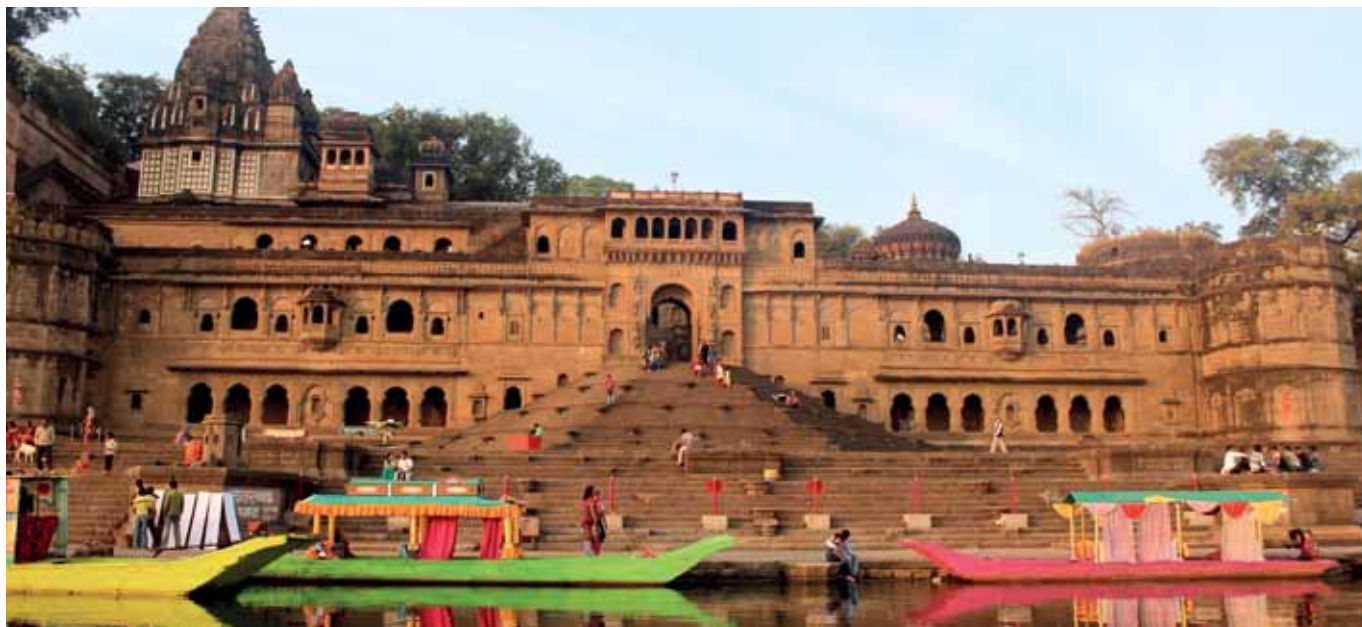
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*Photos by the author*



# From the Land of Shiva – the Maheshwari

By Seema Shah



*The magnificent Ahilya Fort rising above the sacred Narmada River*

My love affair with the gossamer weave of the Maheshwari sari started off fortuitously, when I visited the town it's named after, Maheshwar. An ancient pilgrimage destination with a rich heritage of art and culture, Maheshwar is a small town in Madhya Pradesh, Central India, that lies on the banks of the mighty Narmada River. The great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Matasya Puran* refer to it by the name Mahishmati. Towering above the banks of the river stands the imposing Ahilya Fort, showcasing a slice of Indian history. Akbar built the ramparts here in 1601 and from 1766, it was the home of Ahilya Bai Holkar, the philosopher queen and a prolific builder who personally led armies into battle.

The origin of the Maheshwari saris dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when, according to legend, Ahilya Bai ordered craftsmen from Surat and Malwa to design special nine-yard saris to be gifted to the Peshwa rulers. The saris that were produced by these craftsmen became popular as Maheshwari

saris. It is believed that Ahilya Bai herself created the design of the first one. The Maheshwari is known for its harmonious balance between the border and the body of the sari. Traditionally, the Maheshwari borders have geometrical motifs, as Ahilya Bai did not wear saris with floral motifs. The most common motifs include *chatai* (woven mat pattern), *linth* (brick pattern), *hira* (diamond pattern) and *chameli ki phool* (the chameli flower) – all of which may be traced back to the detailing on the walls, niches and cornices of Maheshwar Fort, as the weavers were asked to follow the designs inscribed on the walls of the fort.

After independence, along with royal patronage, tariff protection also vanished. In their heyday, Maheshwari weavers got silk yarn from China, *zari* (a thread made of gold or silver that is woven into the pattern of the sari) from Surat and dyes from Germany. However, during World War II, yarn and dyes became scarce and by the 1960s, the number of Maheshwari weavers was reduced to less than 300.



*A classic Maheshwari sari with a simple geometric pattern inspired by the fort and temples of Maheshwar. Image courtesy of the REHWA Society*



*Maheshwari saris are loved for their glossy finish and light weight. Reversible borders such as the one featured above, make it possible to wear the sari on either side. Image courtesy of Loomsberry*





A traditional Rehwa sari with a chameli phul border, image courtesy of the REHWA Society



A typical nine-yard sari, image courtesy of the REHWA Society

On the verge of extinction, the American-born, Maheshwar-based, Sally Holkar is credited with reviving the weaving tradition. Sally married the scion of the royal Holkar family in 1966. When Richard and Sally Holkar settled in Maheshwar, the local weavers appealed for their patronage to revive the vanishing craft. The couple then co-founded the REHWA Society, with a vision of health, education and housing to help breathe life into the dying craft. Owing to their timely assistance, Maheshwar has over



A home loom in Maheshwar

3,000 weaver families. I stopped by the REHWA centre and was struck by the sincerity and commitment of its people. A visit to their school for the weavers' children was both humbling and inspiring.

"Handloom is India's heritage," says Sally, who then established the WomenWeave Charitable Trust to extend REHWA'S philosophy. In fact, textiles have been used from the earliest times to express Indian philosophical concepts. In the *Rig Veda*,

"the concept of time is conveyed as the weaving of warp and weft and thus the creation of day and night." The handloom industry in Maheshwar employs people from various castes and religions, including Kshatriyas, Bharuds, Muslims, Kumhars and Kahars. All these people are either from nearby areas or have migrated to Maheshwar and are now permanent residents there. Almost every house has a frame loom and at every step, from dyeing to weaving, all members of the family are involved.



One of the many stunning carvings on the fort walls, that inspire the weavers of the Maheshwari sari. Image courtesy of Ravi Patel

The Maheshwari fabric is known for its lightness, elasticity and fine thread count – their silk and cotton mix is perfect to wear in the summer. A typical Maheshwari sari is either chequered, plain, or has stripes, with a trademark border and *pallu* (the loose end of a sari, is worn over the head and shoulder), setting them apart from the Paithani, Patola or the Kanchipuram. The *pallu* is particularly distinctive with its five stripes, alternating between three-coloured and two white, running along its width. Its specialty is the *bugdi*, the reversible border of the sari, which can be worn either side. This fairly popular border has a *karnphool* pattern, consisting of a variety of leaves and flowers.



A local woman involved in the dyeing and spinning process

Originally, Maheshwari saris were woven in earthy shades such as maroon, red, green, purple and black. Weavers used only natural dyes for the yarn. Today, Maheshwari fabrics are woven in many jewel tones which are derived from chemicals rather than from flowers, roots and leaves. And I am thrilled to have returned home with a Maheshwari stole, whose borders echo the patterns etched on the walls of a historical fort far, far away.

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**Seema Shah** takes great pride in her Indian heritage and hosts a platform called Malabar Chest, which aims to showcase the traditional arts, crafts and designs of India.

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Photos by the author unless otherwise noted



Some more of the carvings on the fort walls, designs that inspire the weavers of the Maheshwari sari. Image courtesy of Rangan Dutta



# The Soul of the Phulkari

By Jaina Mishra

When beholding any antique textile, it is the art that strikes us first. The aesthetic that has been honed by many generations of artists speaks to our eyes. After our eyes have had their fill, we begin to notice the craft that went into creating it – the weaving, the dyes, the joints etc. Exploring the techniques of the craft satisfies our mind. These two visible layers – the art and the craft – are usually sufficient to quench our thirst for beauty. But in many textiles from Asia, beneath these lies one more layer of the palimpsest: the cultural paradigm and it is this embedded layer that speaks to the soul.

The *Phulkari* textile of Punjab is one of the classic examples of such a textile that appeals to the eye, the mind and the soul of the beholder! *Phulkari* literally means 'embroidered flowers' and is the term used for the silk embroidered cotton shawls used in Punjab. (Figure 1) The thread used for the embroidery until the mid-1900s was untwisted silk floss called *patt* that is no longer available. The base was hand-woven, hand-spun cotton cloth. The stitches were worked from the wrong side of the cloth in such a way that the thread was hardly visibly on the back. (Figures 2 and 2a)



Figure 1. Antique Phulkari

The visual impact of a *Phulkari* was created by varying the colour, the angle of the stitch, the density of embroidery, the overall layout and the motifs. Based on the creative choices made, visually descriptive names were assigned to the subcategories. For example, when the base is completely covered with embroidery, it is called a *Bagh* or garden *Phulkari*. An example of a motif-based name is the *Mor* or Peacock *Bagh*. *Bawan* means 52 – so naturally the *Bawan Bagh* (Figure 3) is one that has 52 motifs.

But even though the names of the *Phulkari* types are descriptive, they fail to capture the essence of these textiles. To get to the soul of the art we need to ask, "What was the purpose of its creation?" Most *Phulkaris* were made to serve the wedding traditions of the region, so to understand the soul of the *Phulkari*, we must travel to the Punjab of the late 1800s – an era when traditions directed the conduct of one's life.

The Punjab is a rich, fertile land that lies just below the Himalayas. As a result of its geography, it became the entry point for all land invasions and the people there were

constantly challenged to wars. This particular vulnerability moulded the social norms that were adopted there. As we know, women are often the first casualties of war, so protecting them became a priority and the customs that evolved addressed this need. The dress code for instance, was designed to deflect attention away from the wearer rather than attract it. Women wore covers loosely wrapped over a tunic so that the physical form was undefined. The covers were roughly the size of a bedsheet, 2.5 x 1.25 metres, and were called *chadars* or *odhanas* meaning 'covers'.

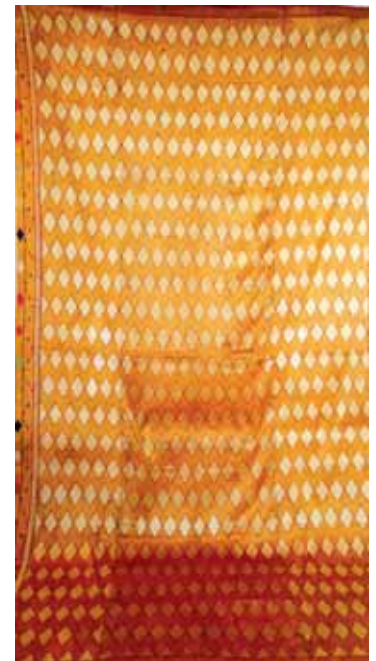


Figure 2. Antique Bagh Phulkari

Marriages were arranged early as the honour of the family depended on the purity of the daughters. The wedding took place over a series of ceremonies that ended when the bride attained puberty and went to live with her husband and his family. The gifts that she took to her new home comprised her dowry and included jewellery, clothes and most importantly, some *Phulkaris*. Traditional wedding songs narrate that a bride was considered fortunate if her dowry consisted of *Phulkaris* that were handmade in her own home by her mother and grandmother, rather than pieces procured from the market. For, only in such *Phulkaris* could the treasure chest of her childhood memories be found.

It is said that the day a girl child was born, the grandmother picked up a needle and began work on the *Phulkari* that would be used at the child's wedding. In the afternoons after the chores were done, the women of the joint



Figure 2a. Detail - Antique Bagh Phulkari



family sat around the inner courtyard, singing or sharing stories of life while they worked on the *Phulkari*. The little girl played around them with her siblings, watching, listening, learning life lessons and building the memories of her childhood.

The transformation of the cloth from the plain base to a stunning work of art is analogous to the transformation of the girl from playful child to young bride, ready for the responsibilities of marriage. And both transformations took the same amount of time.

As the wedding day approached, the ceremonies began. For each ceremony a special type of *Phulkari* was used. In a pre-wedding ceremony called the *haldi*, the bride was anointed with turmeric and sandalwood paste by all the married women present. Following the ritual bath, she was draped in a special *Phulkari* called a *Chope* (Figures 4 and 5).

The wedding took place at the temple; the groom and his family arrived first. The bride was walked to the altar by her brothers. She had been the source of their honour and they, the source of her strength. The four brothers held the four corners of a *Phulkari* over her head as a protective canopy, shielding her from the evil eye as she walked to the altar.

The main wedding ceremony – consisting of the *pheras* (circumambulations) – was then conducted with the bride draped in a special *Phulkari* called the *Subhar*.

The bride received the *Vari da Bagh* from the groom's family – a finely worked *Bagh* made principally by the groom's grandmother. (Figure 6)



Figure 4. Museum-quality, antique Chope Phulkari sari



Figure 5. Antique Chope Phulkari Detail



Figure 3. Bawan Bagh

honour. With this act the wedding was deemed to have taken place and was recognised by society.

A century ago, the *Phulkari* played a central role in traditions. It announced a woman's marital status on special occasions and was worn with pride. It was so important that rituals were allowed to begin only after the most senior woman of the family had draped her *Phulkari*.

Today these *Phulkari* textile traditions are all but extinct. The lines of the country's 1947 partition, drawn throughout the state of Punjab, resulted in intense turmoil. People's lives were ravaged as livelihoods and lifestyles were destroyed. In those hard times, families are known to have exchanged dozens of their heirloom *Phulkaris* for a few kilos of rice. Eventually the strong resilient people of Punjab went on to make successful lives elsewhere. But perhaps the heartbreak never quite healed completely and the traditional production of handmade *Phulkaris* died out. Today, machine-embroidered *Phulkaris* are back in fashion and some groups are trying to revive the handmade ones. But will the golden era of the *Phulkari* ever return?



Figure 6. Antique Bagh Phulkari

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**Jaina Mishra** is a passionate student of culture and the traditional arts of Asia. She is also a member of MENSAs and holds an MBA degree from SPJIMR Mumbai.

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All the images of *Phulkaris* are from the WOVENSOULS collection

# Repercussions at Home and Abroad

## Significance of the Fall of Singapore in 1942

By Priscilla Chua

The sight of Japanese troops marching through Fullerton Square<sup>1</sup> in Singapore following their victory over the British on 15 February 1942 was probably unthinkable just a few years before. After all, Singapore was the impregnable fortress that was central to the British defence in the Far East. From the early British defence preparations to their eventual surrender, this article seeks to explore the fall of Singapore within the larger geopolitical context, while examining the rise of Imperial Japan and taking a closer look at the civilians impacted by the impending Japanese invasion. The fall of Singapore proved to be an event of great significance on the international stage as well, its reverberations felt across the region.

Japan's emergence as an aspiring power in East Asia can arguably be traced to the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after gaining territorial footholds in the region following victories in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. In the latter, Japan had won a decisive battle against the Russians in the Straits of Tsushima, underlining its status as a rising naval power.<sup>2</sup> Japan's *Twenty-One Demands* on China in 1915, which extended its influence in China, further underscored its expansionist ambitions.

The Japanese had in fact entered World War I on the side of the Allies, helping the British to fight the German presence in China. Despite this, the Japanese felt they were never accorded the respect that they deserved. The Washington Conference of 1921-1922, convened by the major powers that had won World War I, produced a naval arms limitation agreement that severely limited the Japanese naval building programme. The Japanese considered this "a clear implication that the Western Allies had combined to ensure that Japan was to be restricted to being a second-tier maritime power"<sup>3</sup>. With its shipbuilding industry diminished, complicated by the economic struggles of the Great Depression of 1929, Japan's search for access to new markets and raw materials in the region took on greater urgency,



Portrait of Sir Shenton Thomas, 1939, Xu Beihong. Oil on canvas, National Museum of Singapore Collection



Map of Singapore from The Sunday Sun and Guardian, 23 February 1941. National Museum of Singapore Collection. This map, from a newspaper pull-out, briefly explains some of the key defences of Singapore. With the opening of what many considered to be a first-class naval base in 1938, it was believed that Singapore was very much an impregnable fortress, as the headline of this page suggests

fuelled by its desire to be regarded as an imperial power on equal footing with the West.

Japan's rising imperialist intentions and territorial expansion in the aftermath of World War I put a strain on its relations with the Western powers. The British in particular, were concerned about the possible Japanese military forays into the Far East. In 1919, the British Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Jellicoe, called for a major battle fleet to be maintained in the Far East as a deterrent against any Japanese southward advance in the future, having assessed that Japan was a "serious potential threat to the British Empire in the Asia-Pacific region"<sup>4</sup>.

Although the battle fleet that Jellicoe recommended was unlikely to materialise owing to economic concerns, the British government recognised the merits of Jellicoe's argument. Plans were thus made for a world-class naval base to be built in the region, should the situation require that warships be called upon in the event of a naval battle. Given its strategic location, Singapore was identified as the ideal site for the construction of this base, which opened amid huge fanfare in 1938. At the time, people celebrated

1 Fullerton Square is situated at the end of Battery Road, which was and still is part of Singapore's Central Business District. Many iconic buildings, such as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, were located on Battery Road between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, symbolic of Singapore's success as a British colony.

2 Duus, Peter, *Modern Japan*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998, pp. 143-146.

3 Brown, Chris, *Singapore 1942*, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2012, p. 19.

4 Chiang, Ming Shun; Farrell, Brian; Miksic, John & Murfett, Malcolm, *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 147.

5 Fedorowich, Kent, "The Evacuation of Civilians from Hong Kong and Malaya/Singapore, 1939-42", in Farrell, Brian & Hunter, Sandy (eds.), *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002, p. 132.

6 Duus, p. 22.

7 The British evacuation policies in Hong Kong and Singapore were catered largely for European civilians – in particular women and children – although officials were mindful of being charged with racial discrimination. For a more information, read Fedorowich's excellent chapter on the evacuation in Hong Kong and Singapore. Fedorowich, pp. 122-145.

8 Fedorowich, pp. 141-143.

9 Farrell, Brian & Hunter, Sandy (eds.), *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002, p. v.

10 Warren, Alan, *Singapore 1942: Britain's Greatest Defeat*, Singapore: Talisman, 2002, p. 282.

11 Warren, p. 282.

12 Ibid., p. 281.





*A group of Hong Kong student refugees on a junk to Laolong, Guangdong, in China, 1942. Image courtesy of Captain Ho Weng Toh*



*Japanese troops marching through Fullerton Square in Singapore after their victory over the British, 1942. Image courtesy of the Imperial War Museum*

this launch of one of the world's most modern naval bases, widely touted as the Gibraltar of the East.

It was perhaps this belief in the "impregnability" of Fortress Singapore that convinced British authorities in Singapore that it was not necessary to have any evacuation plans in place for civilians, even as war clouds had begun to gather over the region by this time.<sup>5</sup> In fact Japan had again proven its militaristic stance with its invasion of Manchuria in 1931, and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937 that had sparked the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. With the Western powers focusing their troops and resources in their battle against Nazi Germany in Europe after the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Japan had seen "an opportunity to remove European influence from Asia and to become the undisputed major power in the East"<sup>6</sup>.

While colonial officials in Hong Kong already had emergency plans in place to evacuate civilians in the event of the outbreak of war, such a plan in Singapore would have been viewed as defeatist, not least because the British authorities in Singapore had underestimated Japan's military prowess, while overestimating their own defence capabilities. The British Governor at that time, Sir Shenton Thomas, was also adamant that should the British community flee at the first signs of hostilities, it would not only undermine the morale of the local population, it would also lend itself to a public relations nightmare, putting a dent on British imperial prestige. This in turn put Thomas at odds with the military planners, who needed the civilians to be "out of harm's way in order that they did not hinder the movement of the troops".<sup>7</sup>

With no proper system in place to evacuate the people, what resulted was haste and chaos in the final days leading up to the fall of Singapore as civilians grew desperate to flee the island when Japanese bombings intensified in December 1941 and January 1942. Many were left to their own devices, having to pay for their own passage. There was essentially a complete breakdown in authority and communication as it was later found that evacuation permits had been issued at officials' own discretion. Confusion also reigned on docksides as evacuees were given conflicting instructions – some ships required special passes for boarding while others had no objections.<sup>8</sup>

The fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 was of great international significance. The Axis powers congratulated Japan on its resounding victory, which cemented its status as a rising empire. For the British, it was a humiliating defeat that was called the "worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history"<sup>9</sup> by then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Shockwaves were felt in Australia and New Zealand as well. Australians "had always looked to the 'mother country', Great Britain, for succour and protection"<sup>10</sup>, while Fortress Singapore had been a reassuring stronghold of British power

for New Zealanders. With the fall of Singapore, there was a real sense of panic that the Japanese would now turn their attention onto Australia and New Zealand – the Japanese bombing of the Australian city of Darwin barely a few days after Singapore's fall merely drove this fear home.

Australia had in fact begun relooking its security alliance with the British when the Japanese invasion of the region began in December 1941, with then Prime Minister John Curtin famously declaring to his people, "Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom"<sup>11</sup>. After the British defeat in Singapore, Curtin recalled the Australian troops from the Middle East for the defence of Australia, much to the chagrin of Churchill who had wanted these troops to defend Burma, which was still fighting the Japanese at that time.<sup>12</sup>

The legacy of the fall of Singapore was far-reaching for the region. The manner of the defeat dealt a blow to the supposed superiority of British imperial power as Britain had failed to defend its possessions in the Far East, leaving people to fend on their own. It marked the beginning of the end of the old colonial empires, paving the way for the wave of decolonisation and independence movements that swept throughout Southeast Asia after World War II.



*Commemorative medal issued by Nazi Germany inscribed with "Einnahme von Singapore" (Capture of Singapore) 11 February 1942, National Museum of Singapore Collection. This medal was produced by Nazi Germany, Japan's ally in the war. It is inscribed with the Japanese Army's original target date for the capture of Singapore, which was meant to coincide with the anniversary of Japan's first emperor, Emperor Jimmu*

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**Priscilla Chua** is a curator with the National Museum of Singapore. Since joining the museum in 2008, she has developed and curated a number of Singapore-themed exhibitions. Her latest one, *Witness to War: Remembering 1942*, is a special international exhibition in commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the fall of Singapore.

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This article is written in conjunction with the exhibition, *Witness to War: Remembering 1942*, currently showing at the National Museum of Singapore. The artefacts featured in this article are on display in the exhibition.

# The Nauvari Sari

Popularly Known as the Nine Yards

By Devika Loomba

The sari, a beautiful unstitched garment from the Indian subcontinent, evokes luxury, a sense of grandeur and richness of fabric, as much as it does practical everyday living, simplicity and versatility. This sense of splendour and magnificence as well as utility is best embodied in the majestic nine-yard or *nauvari* sari. Regular saris are anywhere between 4.5 and 6 metres in length, however, the *nauvari* is considerably longer at about eight metres. It originated in the erstwhile Maratha Kingdom, especially the Western Deccan made up of the central, south and south-western parts of India. This includes the present-day states of Maharashtra and Karnataka, especially the Konkan areas along the western coastal area, as well as Tamil Nadu on the east coast. It is therefore popularly known as the *Deccan sari* or *Maharashtrian sari*.

The *nauvari* is draped in a style similar to the Maharashtrian *dhoti*. Worn by men, this is an unstitched lower body garment that hangs loosely with folds in front and is tucked at the back of the waist. It is therefore also sometimes referred to as *kaashtha*, which means a sari tucked in at the back. Given the style of draping and its length, the *nauvari* has another unique feature in that it requires no



The decorative band at the back of a nauvari sari, image from *Saris: Tradition and Beyond*, by Rta Kapoor Chishti

accompanying garments. In sari terms it is worn without a petticoat. In fact, the variations in the basic draping style of the *nauvari* have complex social and economic connotations. Traditionally there has been a marked difference in the wearing style of this sari between various social castes and economic classes. While the upper caste Brahmin women, from the richer sections of society, wore this in an elegant and conservative manner, the poorer working-class women, with a lower social status, wore it as practical attire that would



Lavani Nautanki dancers wearing nauvari saris



A group of women wearing nauvaris, painting by M V Dhurandhar

give them the mobility required to perform their daily chores. This meant that while Brahmin women wore the *nauvari* with the portion at the back almost trailing in a flowing fashion, working-class women such as fisherwomen from the Koli community, wore it higher up, often at knee length, so as to wade through water and slushy marketplaces.

In addition, the fabrics used in the *nauvaris* worn by the different sections of society accentuated the socio-economic distinctions between these groups.

Wealthier Brahmin and Maratha women preferred the more luxurious handwoven fine cotton (*mulmul*) and silk weaves. The cottons were so fine, light and airy that they had a certain fluidity and translucency to them and were therefore traditionally found in darker shades of red, green, blue and purple. Fine checks were also popular, with gold *zari* (thread) patterns woven into the body



Maharani Chimmabai, of Baroda, with her daughter, both in nauvaris

of the sari and the borders. A traditionally draped *nauvari* would show off these elements, especially the rich *zari* borders that came together at the back to form a decorative band. In contrast, the working-class women were only able to afford coarse cotton and later mill-produced ones or the shinier *nauvaris* made of polyester with artificial *zari*. This disparity was further highlighted by the fact that the richer women wore 'the whole nine yards', while their less fortunate counterparts could only afford a shorter length, often having to cut it into two to make a cloth piece to cover the upper body. Some of these distinctions continue to the present day; however, a wide variation of materials, techniques and market range is available these days.



The *nauvari* in popular perception is evocative of power and sensuality. Historically there are legends around model administrators and brave warrior queens going to war wearing *nauvaris* while riding horses and wielding swords. Such images of the popular Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi (in present-day Uttar Pradesh) and Ahilyabai Holkar of Maheshwar (in present-day Madhya Pradesh) challenged patriarchal notions of power and masculinity, brought to the fore the role of women in leadership and administration, and most importantly at the time, became symbols of nationalism and resistance to the British Raj. The *nauvari* was therefore linked with these virtues, albeit inadvertently.

Famous Indian artists such as Raja Ravi Varma and M V Dhurandhar, further helped to shape the image of the *nauvari* in popular imagination. Raja Ravi Varma encouraged his models to wear the *nauvari* as he found it to be a sensual garment, one that brought out the contours of a woman's figure. His muse was the renowned Indian classical singer Anjanibai Malpekar, a *nauvari*-clad beauty, the *guru* (teacher) of classical music veterans Kumar Gandharva and Kishori Amonkar, to name a few. Dhurandhar, also inspired by Anjanibai to do an oil painting, mostly painted women from different walks of life wearing various forms of the *nauvari*. This included Brahmin women, fisherwomen and those from the untouchable Mahar community.

The performing arts have also been influenced over time to reflect the beauty and grace of the sensual *nauvari*. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when women performing in theatre and films was frowned upon, famous male actors such as Bal Gandharva, clad in a nine-yard sari, were seen playing the lead female roles. What is interesting to note here is that for a conservative society, far from being stigmatised, he was popular, especially with the masses for his *Sangeet Natak* (musicals). He was also honoured with national awards for his contribution to Marathi theatre, when he received the President's Award (the present-day Sangeet Natak Academy Award) in 1955; and the Padma Bhushan in 1964. His use of the *nauvari* further consolidated and augmented its appeal across social groups.

Furthermore, the *nautanki* dancers (travelling theatre dancers) have always used the *nauvari* as an alluring tool of attraction through their *lavani* dance. Emerging in 16<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, it



A series of paintings by M V Dhurandhar, of women of different social strata wearing nauvaris

explores themes of love, passion, beauty, longing and even aspects of society and religion. The *lavani* dancers have always been associated with tantalising, sexy and powerful rhythmic dance moves to the sound of the *dholak* (indigenous drum). Traditionally, given its seductive and flirtatious nature, the dance was performed by lower castes to a male audience. However, over time with the advent of cinema, it found a new and respectable platform in Bollywood, where famous actresses such as Madhuri Dixit and Vidya Balan popularised it and thus made the *nauvari* fashionable for a whole new generation of women.

In contemporary times, the *nauvari* continues to be popular, although as with other sari types, the advent of globalisation and influx of attire from different parts of the world, mean it is no longer the first choice for daily life. While one still finds some working-class women wearing it for their everyday

chores, for the rest it seems to be a garment kept for special occasions such as weddings and festivals. Reinventing itself for the changing times, there is now a ready-to-wear, stitched version for women no longer adept at donning saris on their own. Of all sari forms, with its evocative layers of grandeur, elegance, sensuality and fun, the *nauvari* still captures the imagination.



Riding pillion in a nauvari, image from Saris: Tradition and Beyond, by Rta Kapoor Chishti



Lady in the Moonlight, 1889, painting by Raja Ravi Varma, from the book Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India by Rupika Chawla

**Devika Loomba** is from India and has been living in Singapore since 2015, the year she joined FOM. She is a history, culture and textile enthusiast and loves saris.

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# Kashmir's Pashmina Shawls

## A Prized Indian Textile

By Tara Dhar Hasnain

Across the world for many centuries, Kashmir's pashmina shawls have been highly prized, coveted by kings and immortalised in literature. Their delicacy, gossamer-thinness, softness, warmth, and breathtakingly beautiful designs have made them objects of intense desire, and they have been celebrated in history, politics, fiction and poetry – in Kashmiri, Persian, English, French, Russian and other languages. Owing to their being sold across the Indo-Persian world from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the Ottoman empire, in Egypt, and in Europe and America in later centuries, these textiles have symbolized more than merely business transactions. Such shawls were treasured as objects of diplomatic gift exchange between kings, as necessary elements of a well-to-do woman's trousseau, as status symbols, and as investments of high artistic value, apart from just being items of clothing – reminders of a land of great natural beauty.

My own parents received such shawls at their wedding. For years, on cold winter evenings, my father would wrap himself cosily in his warm and soft *dussa*, a man's large-sized Pashmina shawl. His mother, when he was still a small boy, wove a shawl for her daughter-in-law-to-be. As a child, I regarded my mother's pashmina shawl as a tangible connection with that grandma who died before my parents were married.

There is a lot to this subject: the history of this craft in Kashmir, where this very special wool comes from, how it is woven and the intricate work done to ornament each shawl. In earlier centuries, the ornamentation was done by the *kani*, or the twill-tapestry technique, followed in more recent times by delicate hand embroidery, or *amli* work, so fine that at times it is hard to tell the right from the wrong side. Each shawl of this quality can take up to a year or more to complete, depending on the level and fineness of the decorative work, unless produced on power looms or machines. This short article will give you a glimpse into its history, the changes in markets and demand and some basics of the process.

The weaving of pashmina wool was started in a big way in Kashmir in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by a native Sultan, Zain-ul-Abidin, much loved by his people for the many crafts he introduced into the kingdom. He invited expert weavers from Persia and Central Asia to teach his people new weaving techniques, introducing fine shawl-making there. This delicate art received a further impetus after the third Mughal emperor, Akbar, annexed Kashmir to



*Pashmina, Sikh period, 1830-50*

India in the late 1580s. The Mughals appreciated fine fabrics and the delicacy of the patterns woven into them, although at that time designs were found only on the two ends or *pallus*. These became fashionable wear among Mughal royalty and courtiers, as also among other kings in the region.

These early woven pashminas were worn as waistbands or *patkas*, or just thrown over the shoulder as a mantle. Akbar himself was very taken by them and often wore them in pairs, back to back, as *doshallas* (twin shawls). During these early times, pashminas were worn only by men. Much later they would become popular with women and that would have an impact on their sizes and colours, as well as the styles of decorative work done on them. They became very popular in India, Persia, the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, long before the craze for them gripped upper-class European women, especially in France and Britain.

By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the Afghans had wrested the kingdom of Kashmir from the Mughals. By then Kashmir's shawls had become legendary and had an international market. Seeing an opportunity, the new rulers imposed back-breaking taxes on the shawl industry, known as *Dage-shawl*, which brought untold misery to the already poor artisans, drastically cutting down the number of workshops. One of the innovations during this otherwise dark period was the manufacture of striped shawls, *khatraaz*, which were very popular among Persians. In 1819 the Sikhs took over



*Empress Josephine wearing a kani dress and a kani shawl, image courtesy Wikipedia*



*Antique kani (jamawar) shawl on white base*





Kani (jamawar) patka, 18<sup>th</sup> century



Kani (jamawar) shawl, early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Kashmir. Under their rule, the shawl industry did better again, as Sikhs loved these shawls.

A new developmental phase began when Napoleon presented his Empress, Josephine, with some Kashmir shawls. Now they seized the imagination of European women. Queen Victoria also acquired such shawls for her own use and as valuable gifts. Soon, every woman in elite society wanted some and so they appeared in painted portraits of society ladies of the time. From now on more shawls were produced for women than for men.

This expanding demand led to breakneck production in Kashmir and hand embroidery started, first to add the finishing touches to a *kani* (twill tapestry woven) shawl, but later entire shawls were embroidered, partly to escape prohibitive taxes, which were still calculated on *kani* work. But the prices of such hand-produced (handwoven and hand-ornamented) shawls still remained high. So, to satisfy the growing demand, enterprising Europeans set up power looms to mass-produce much cheaper but passable imitations in many European towns – Norwich, Edinburgh, Paisley, Paris, Lyon, Vienna among others. However, the designs produced on such looms were more uniform and less attractive, plus the material itself could not compete with the ethereal softness, fineness and lightness of real pashmina or *shahtoosh* fibre. *Shahtoosh* shawls were fine enough to pass through a woman's ring.



Author's antique kani shawl

At the 1851 Universal Exhibition of London they were wildly applauded, but two decades later, the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War spelt the death knell for such luxury dress items. This was followed by a severe famine in the Kashmir Valley from 1877-79 that killed off many of the malnourished shawl-makers. Gone were the many foreign designers who used to set up camp in Kashmir, especially the famous Frenchmen Jean-Baptiste-Amédée Couder and Antony Berrus.

Yet today, these wearable works of art and high design remain in great demand for a discriminating clientele on the sub-continent and among the *cognoscenti* internationally. Innovations continue, with the last 15 years seeing two

beautiful types of embroidery, the *kalamkari* and the *papier mâché* style.

In contrast to its changing fortunes in international markets, the pashmina shawl remains a treasured possession for Kashmiris themselves. It reminds us of our emotional bonds with our family and our people, our shared values, the things we hold dear. Its textures, its patterns of *chinar* (plane tree) leaves, its colours that recreate Kashmir's spring, autumn and summer colours, put us in mind of our famous artistic traditions and our distinctive culture.



Author's antique khatraaz shawl

#### Some basic facts:

The fineness of wool is measured in microns. 'Cashmere' wool must be less than 20 microns in thickness. Fine pashmina is often just 10-15 microns, *shahtoosh* being the finest. *Pashm* wool comes from the warm underside hairs of a high-altitude mountain goat (*capra hircus*), found at elevations of over 4,000 metres, especially in the Changthang Plateau, which stretches around 1,600 kilometres from south-eastern Ladakh into Tibet. These goats are reared by the nomadic Changpa community. In spring, the goats shed these hairs by rubbing themselves against rocks and shrubs. Only a small quantity is recovered each year. The hairs are sold to Kashmiris, who over the centuries developed the skill to process the yarn and spin it into fine pashmina shawls on spindles (*yender*). At this stage, it's a plain shawl. Then this is often made either into intricately patterned *kani* shawls, using the famed twill-tapestry method (*kani* or *jamawar*), or finely embroidered (*amli*) in numberless designs by master craftsmen, whose skills have been honed over many generations.

**Tara Dhar Hasnain** works as an editor for Marshal Cavendish publishers and accepts independent manuscripts. She enjoys digging into history and art, and going on cultural trips.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos courtesy of the author



# Ravana – The Complex Demon of the Ramayana

By Ruth Gerson

The *Ramayana* is a long and complex epic, rich with characters and events, many of which are traceable to the early history of India. Ascribed to the sage Valmiki, who is believed to have written it about 2,000 years ago, it is a confrontation between good and evil. The evil in this larger-than-life story is personified by Ravana, the demonic king of Lanka, with the seventh avatar (incarnation) of the Hindu god Vishnu personified as Rama, prince of Ayodhya, sent to earth to vanquish him.

Who is Ravana? He is the 10-faced and 20-armed demon who is the epitome of evil, chief of all other demons. Ravana is invincible to humans, animals, gods and demons and can change his form to whatever shape and whenever he wishes. He can even cheat death by removing his heart and keeping it safe in a box, entrusted to his personal *rishi* (sage or seer). It is evident that Ravana poses a most formidable character who shapes the *Ramayana* and draws the story out to extreme lengths as his antics (including battles against his enemies and collaborating with allied demons) are recalled. Was Ravana always a demon, or did his life circumstances make him that way? Early Hindu mythology tells of a different being, not the belligerent demon, but rather a meek doorkeeper.



Figure of Ravana from Benares, North India, 20<sup>th</sup> century



A *Ramayana* painting with three main scenes, one in each horizontal register. The top register shows Hanuman fighting a small group of demons; the middle register shows Ravana's youngest son (Akshakumara) in the chariot being killed by Hanuman. The bottom shows Indrajit setting off in his chariot to capture Hanuman. From Cherial, Andhra Pradesh, South India, 1968

The legend tells of the two demi-god brothers, Jaya and Vijaya, gatekeepers (*dvarapalas*) at Vaikuntha Loka, the celestial abode of Vishnu, who were ill-treated by the gods as they passed the threshold of this palace. One such story tells that every time visitors passed through the doorway they plucked a hair off these two despondent brothers' heads

until they became bald. Miserable, they eventually took their grievance to Vishnu asking him for a reprieve from this painfully humiliating situation.

A better-known version that tells of the two gatekeepers' woes, originates in the fourth century *Bhagavata Purana* (the sacred writing devoted to Krishna, Vishnu's eighth avatar). In it, four *kumara* (sages), born as creations of Brahma's mind and who appear as children, arrive at the gate of Vishnu's abode. Not knowing who they are, Jaya and Vijaya stop them at the gate, barring them from entering the palace, declaring that Vishnu is resting and cannot be disturbed. The furious *kumara* curse the gatekeepers, saying that in their next lives they will no longer be divine, but will be mere mortals.

At that point, Vishnu appears and the gatekeepers ask him to lift the *kumara*'s curse. However, it cannot be undone. As a way out, the god offers them



Thai Ravana in a *khon* performance fighting with Hanuman, photo courtesy of the Tourism Authority of Thailand



two choices – to live seven births on earth as humans or to experience three births as his enemies. Either choice will ensure their former divine status. Unable to bear being away from Vishnu for seven lives, Jaya and Vijaya choose the second alternative, reasoning that it is better to be near the god as enemies than not be with him at all. Consequently, they are reborn into the material world for three lives as demons, one lifetime being that of the brothers Ravana and Kumbhakarna.

There has been a long history of enmity between the brothers and Vishnu. For this one must understand the Hindu view of the universe – just as humans are born and die, so is the universe repeatedly created and destroyed. Each complete cycle of the universe comprises four *yuga* (eons), their length determined by complicated mathematical formulae. The first *yuga* is considered the best, with an almost ideal way of life. With each proceeding *yuga*, the universe loses some of its quality until the fourth *yuga* is reached, the weakest, most corrupt and undesirable. According to Hindu belief, the present *yuga* in which we live is the fourth *yuga*, the *Kali Yuga*. The strained relations between the god Vishnu and the demonised brothers go back to the first *yuga*, appearing in new forms in each cosmic era. It is said that their strength ebbed with each subsequent birth.

#### Vishnu's confrontations with the demons in the *yuga*

**Satya Yuga** – first *yuga*: The brothers are born as Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu. In this era, Vishnu takes on his third and fourth avatars as Varaha (the boar) and Narasimha (half-lion, half-man) to fight the *asura* (demons). Hiranyaksha kidnaps and takes Earth to the muddy depths of the cosmic ocean. Lord Vishnu assumes the boar avatar and rescues Earth, slaying the demon. Angered by his younger brother's death, Hiranyakashipu



Depiction of Ravana shaking Kailasa, wall relief, Cave 21, Ellora Caves, Maharashtra, India, image courtesy of Wikipedia



A ceremonial hanging depicting the battle between Rama and Ravana, from the Coromandel Coast, eastern Tamil Nadu, South India, late 18<sup>th</sup> century

decides to gain magical powers by worshipping Brahma. He uses these to obstruct people from worshipping Vishnu and is subsequently killed by Vishnu's avatar Narasimha.

**Treta Yuga** – second *yuga*: Born as Ravana and Kumbhakarna, the two are confronted by Rama (Vishnu's seventh avatar) and his brother Lakshmana. Here Ravana appears in all his glory, with multiple heads and arms, wreaking havoc until he is ultimately slain in battle by Rama.

**Dwapara Yuga** – third *yuga*: Born as Shishupala and Dantavakra, the demons are enemies of Krishna (Vishnu's eighth avatar) and his older brother Balarama. Shishupala is slain by Krishna for his disgraceful behaviour and his attempt to interfere in the great sacrifice performed by King Yudhishtira who, according to the *Mahabharata*, was to unite all *kshatriya* (rulers) under him, and for insulting Krishna as a worthless cowherd. Dantavakra, who did not attend the sacrifice, attacks Krishna after the ceremony in order to avenge Shishupala's death. He is defeated by Krishna and killed in a mace duel with the god.

After the three rebirths and deaths as Vishnu's enemies, Jaya and Vijaya attain liberation.



Shadow puppet of Ravana made of buffalo, goat or deer skin, from Andhra Pradesh, South India, 1930-60

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**Ruth Gerson**, a long-time resident of Bangkok and an active member of the National Museum Volunteers (Bangkok), is an avid traveller, much-published author of books on art and culture and frequent contributor to museum and art publications.

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Unless otherwise noted, artefacts are from the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, images courtesy of the National Heritage Board

# Symbols and Scripts – The Language of Craft

Special Exhibition Gallery, Level 2, IHC

7 Dec 2017 – 30 Jun 2018



Vanki or armlet, Tamil Nadu, South India, 19<sup>th</sup> century, gold. Collection of the Indian Heritage Centre

The *Symbols and Scripts* exhibition is the Indian Heritage Centre's (IHC) second special exhibition and seeks to showcase craft traditions from the Indian subcontinent in the context of Singapore's Indian communities. Traditionally, craftsmen have used signs, symbols, patterns and scripts in the decoration of handmade objects in the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years. This exhibition presents iconic examples of craft traditions representing the material culture of Indian communities through craft forms across diverse media. It will also examine the role of these crafts as trade objects and underscore the trading networks between South and Southeast Asia. To complement the exhibition, the IHC has commissioned a contemporary art installation in response to the theme of the exhibition.



Brocade stole with hare ram, hare krishna inscriptions in Devanagari script, Benares/Varanasi, North India, late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Silk with silver thread. Collection of the Indian Heritage Centre

## Book Launch – Singapore Indian Heritage

*Singapore Indian Heritage* is the IHC's first publication since the centre's opening in 2015. It comprises essays by respected scholars and IHC's curators on different aspects of Indian heritage, as told through the centre's permanent galleries. It also features the centre's collection of over 300 artefacts, photographs and documents. Edited by Professors Rajesh Rai and A Mani, the publication is an important addition to the compilation of writings on Singapore's Indian community and in particular on the community's cultural heritage. The book's foreword was written by Ambassador Gopinath Pillai.

The book costs \$53.50 (20% FOM discount is applicable) and is available at Museum Label, the Indian Heritage Centre, National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum and the Malay Heritage Centre.



L to R: Ms Nalina Gopal (Curator, IHC), Assoc Prof Rajesh Rai and Prof A Mani (co-editors, *Singapore Indian Heritage*), Ambassador Gopinath Pillai (Chairman, IHC Advisory Board), Ms Chang Hwee Nee (CEO, National Heritage Board)

Text and photos courtesy of the Indian Heritage Centre



# Field Studies Singapore

This programme is for those who are not looking for a long-term commitment, but do want to know and understand more about Singapore and along the way, make friends with like-minded people. Field Studies participants work in pairs, with the support of experienced mentors, to create unique half-day tours which are followed by a friendly lunch.

The programme starts on 24 January 2018 and lasts approximately 10 weeks, beginning with an orientation morning. Tours will be each Wednesday from 9:00 am to 2:30 pm, 31 January to 28 March 2018.

Highlights of prior tours include: Kampong Glam, Biopolis, Bukit Timah Railway, Semakau Landfill, Bukit Brown Cemetery and Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve.



It's a great way to learn about places both familiar and foreign, sharing knowledge and meeting new people. Registration has already begun and as it's a small group of 12 participants, it would be wise to register early to avoid disappointment.

We are seeking mentors to assist our Field Studies Singapore participants in the 2018 programme. It's a great way to see more of Singapore and assist fellow FOM members. Please contact Jenni Alton at [altonmj@gmail.com](mailto:altonmj@gmail.com)

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# My Grandfather's Diary from 1941-42

By Sakiko Sugioka

The new exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore, *Witness to War: Remembering 1942*, has a personal significance for me. In the dimly lit Zone 2, my grandfather's war diary is displayed in a showcase, along with his soldier's handbook and other items that belonged to the Japanese army. In a small, black-covered notebook, he kept a daily diary from 15 November 1941 until 4 April 1942. He had it with him for 66 years until he passed away in 2008 at the age of 96.

Born in Nagasaki in 1912, my grandfather, Takeatsu Kataoka, was a platoon leader in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Independent Engineer Regiment that participated in the Malayan and Philippine campaigns. After landing at Singora in Thailand, near the Malayan border, his regiment spent 55 days in the Malay Peninsula before arriving in Singapore. His unit's main responsibility was to transport troops, trucks and tanks across rivers. They needed to rapidly repair more than 250 bridges that British sappers had destroyed. The engineers jumped into the water to build bridges, and at times used their own bodies as piers to support the bridge for the tanks and troops to cross the rivers.

Despite the dangerous nature of their missions, his unit managed to avoid casualties during the Malayan campaign. However, their good fortune did not last. Shortly after the fall of Singapore, he lost a platoon member in the Philippine campaign, while fighting against American forces. When his regiment was reconstituted into the Landing Engineer Regiment, he was the only one ordered to stay in Manchuria while the rest were deployed and annihilated in the battle against American and Australian forces in the Bougainville Campaign.

After the war, my grandfather returned to civilian life and pursued his career as an engineer; however, he had never forgotten about the comrades whose lives were lost in the war. Though he actively participated in the war veterans' associations, it wasn't until 1984 that he finally located some of those who had fought in his regiment. He found out that several were still alive and that an association for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Independent Engineer Regiment existed. He soon reunited with them and in 1985, when he was 73 years old, he decided to publish his diary along with a preface, maps and charts. His memoir, *Memorandum of a Platoon Leader*, was donated to the families of his comrades and governmental institutions, including the US Library of Congress.

The memoir includes a collection of vignettes that he wrote post-war. Some concern fond memories of the downtime he spent with his comrades, playing mahjong and fishing, while others provide details of his missions. The last chapter in the



Takeatsu Kataoka's war diary 1941-1942 (second from left), on loan from the family of Takeatsu Kataoka

book is about the time he returned to Singapore, 18 years after the war. He was in tears when he visited Bukit Timah, remembering those who had lost their lives there. He then drove to the shorefront of the Johor-Singapore causeway and recalled an incident when all of his unit members insisted they wanted to be the ones accompanying him on a deadly mission to reconnoitre the strait.

My grandfather always told us that he would live to be 120. He was an avid traveller and never afraid of adventures – he even made it to the South Pole when he was 92. I never understood where his motivation came from, but reading his memoir made me realise that he was not just living his life, but those of his former comrades as well.

If it weren't for this exhibition, I would not have had the chance to fully understand his memoir. I would like to thank the curators for selecting this diary for such an important exhibition, and for their efforts to provide the ideal display situation. I also have deep appreciation for the researcher who produced brilliant captions for the display and translated the memoir. Finally, I am indebted to my fellow Japanese docents who supported me from the beginning and invested so much of their time in studying the memoir. My family and I couldn't have thought of any better place for this diary to end up and I am sure my grandfather would feel the same.

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**Sakiko Sugioka** is a former Japanese docent.

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*Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore*



## Island Notes

# Deepavali

By Darly Furlong



Deepavali or Diwali is the Hindu festival of lights and there are many stories regarding its origins. One of them celebrates the triumphant return of Lord Rama to his capital, Ayodhya, after defeating the demon king, Ravana. His subjects welcomed him by lighting lamps along his path, so the *diya* or lamp is the hallmark of Deepavali celebrations.

In Singapore, Deepavali is celebrated with pomp and pageantry, primarily in Little India where you find shops brimming with decorations, flowers, *mithai* or sweets, colourful clothes etc. During this festive occasion, Hindu temples will be decked out and lit up for visiting supplicants.



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**Darly Furlong** is an avid history and mythology buff. She enjoys living in the Katong district and exploring Peranakan culture.

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# Monday Morning Lectures

During November and December, the Monday Morning Lectures will be held at the National Library, 100 Victoria Street, promptly at 10:30 am. Please check the website for specific information. Do come earlier to get a seat, meet and make new friends and find out about FOM's various activities. **Kindly note the change of venue and time as you plan your Monday Morning.**

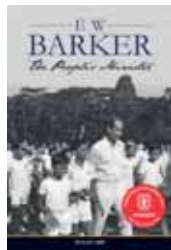


## 6 November • The Kingdom of Women - A World Totally Unlike Ours

Speaker: Choo Wai Hong

The Mosuo, from China's Yunnan mountains, is the last surviving matrilineal and matriarchal society in the world. Choo Wai Hong will

explore and compare the gender roles practised by the Mosuo against the backdrop of our society.



## 13 November • Remembering the Nation's Founding Fathers: A Take from E W Barker's Biographer

Speaker: Susan Sim

Biographers, it has been said, are obsessive trawlers of the past, collectors of little-known facts and re-constructors of historical scenes. What role do biographies

have in helping a nation remember its founding fathers? Susan Sim provides a personal view.



## 20 November • Ivories from China: The Sir Victor Sassoon Collection

Speaker: Rose Kerr

A collection of over 500 pieces of carved ivory was assembled by Sir Victor Sassoon between 1915 and 1927, items ranging in date from the Shang dynasty to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rose Kerr formerly of the V&A, is a trustee of the Sir Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art.



## 27 November • Cambodia: History, Culture and Ancient Empires

Speaker: Dr D Kyle Latinis

The lecture will introduce Cambodian history and culture from the dawn of Funan to the dissipation of Angkor – covering over 2,000 years of dynamic socio-cultural evolution.



## 4 December • Dehua Ware

Speaker: Pauline Ong

The speaker will de-mystify Dehua ware, also called Blanc-de-Chine, the pure, ivory-white porcelain that comes from the kilns of Fujian, in southern China.

# URA Walks



## URA/FOM Chinatown Heritage Trails

These walking tours are conducted by FOM docents for the URA, around the four precincts of Chinatown. They are two hours long and start from the URA building in Maxwell Road. Registration is required and can be found on the eventbrite site <https://www.eventbrite.sg/o/urban-redevelopment-authority-7497466443>. Please note that registration is open only one week before the tour.

### Tours in November and December are as follows:

Friday 10 November:	Bukit Pasoh
Saturday 11 November:	Two tours – Telok Ayer and Bukit Pasoh
Saturday 18 November:	Tanjong Pagar
Saturday 25 November:	Kreta Ayer
Friday 1 December:	Two tours – Telok Ayer and Bukit Pasoh
Saturday 9 December:	Telok Ayer
Saturday 16 December:	Telok Ayer





## Coordinators Contact List



**ACM – Laura Socha & Joanna Boot**  
acmcoordinators@gmail.com



**GB – Dorit Ginat**  
gb.outreach@gmail.com



**IHC- Jyoti Ramesh**  
milphuah@gmail.com



**MHC – Chong Yit Peng**  
mhccoordinator@yahoo.com



**NMS – Alison Kennedy-Cooke & Lim Yuen Ping**  
nmscoordinators@yahoo.com



**TPM – Angela Kek**  
angelakek@yahoo.com.sg



**SAM – Maisy Koh**  
sam.coordinator@yahoo.com.sg



**STPI – Ikumi Fushimi & Virginie Labbe**  
stpicoordinators@yahoo.com



**SYSNMH – Karen Ng**  
sysnmhcoordinator@yahoo.com



**URA Heritage Trails – Heather Muirhead**  
heather.muirhead@live.com

**JDs**  
jdcoordinator1@yahoo.co.jp and jdcoordinator2@yahoo.co.jp

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# Explore Singapore!

To join an ES! event, please go to the FOM website to register on line or register at the ES! table at any Monday Morning Lecture.



## **The Golden Bell Mansion – Past and Present**

Thursday 9 November

10:00 am – 12:00 noon (1:00 pm, including lunch)

Fee: \$25 (Optional Danish lunch, an extra \$25)

The Golden Bell Mansion, whose scenic setting is on a hilltop halfway up Mount Faber, was constructed in 1910 by Tan Tock Seng's great-grandson. Today, the mansion is used as the Danish Seaman's Church. Mr Roney Tan, a descendant of Tan Tock Seng, will share the history of this beautiful house. After that, Reverend Kirsten Eistrup will tell us about the church's activities, followed by a tour of the mansion.



## **This is not Your Typical Art Gallery – MRT Circle Line Art**

Thursday 23 November

10:30 am – 12:30 pm

Fee: \$25

Join Explore Singapore! on a tour of the artworks in the Circle Line stations. Learn about the site-specific themes that reflect the culture and historical heritage of each area and its community. Our guide will talk about the background to the artworks, why they were commissioned and their significance in relation to their location.



## **Shiwan Ceramic Art – An Introduction to its Appreciation**

Thursday 30 November

10:00 am – 12:00 noon

Fee: \$25

Shiwan ceramics take their name from a small town in Guandong, China. They are little known outside China although Shiwan has been exporting the ceramics to Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East and beyond for almost 1,000 years. Join us for a rare visit to a collector's home to learn about this ceramic art and hear stories from Chinese history, mythology and the folklore associated with it.



## **A Space for God – St Mary of the Angels**

Thursday 14 December

10:00 am – 12:00 noon

Fee: \$25

On a hill in the middle of Bukit Batok is the site of the Franciscan monastery and church, St Mary of the Angels. A three-year project to take the site into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, resulted in a flow of buildings comprising the church, a columbarium, friary, monastery and the St Clare Parish Centre. Our guide will explain the spiritual and architectural aspects of putting this building together.





**KALA TARANG** invites you to

## Crafts Bazaar 2017

**CELEBRATING INDIAN CRAFTS**

Colonial@Scotts  
31a Scotts Road, Singapore 228243  
30<sup>th</sup> (Thu) Nov to 2<sup>nd</sup> (Sat) Dec 2017  
11AM to 5PM

The Bazaar will offer you a glimpse of the varied and vibrant crafts from all across India. On display and sale will be home decor items, home furnishings, tableware, clothes, sarees, bags, unstitched fabric, shoes, kids' clothes, wall art and more, made by traditional Indian artisans.

Go to [www.facebook.com/KalaTarang](http://www.facebook.com/KalaTarang)  
or call (+65)92361451 for more details



# Textile Enthusiasts Group

**Programme:** Collector's Corner - Part II by Lewa Pardomuan

**Date:** Friday 3 November

**Time:** Arrive at 10:00 am for 10:30 start

**Host:** Lewa Pardomuan

TEG members are excited about having a second opportunity to view pieces from Lewa Pardomuan's special textile collection. His precious textiles have been acquired in various places in Indonesia as well as Singapore, Thailand, Australia, Malaysia and the Netherlands.

Lewa Pardomuan (photo on the right) was born and raised in Jakarta. He left the Indonesian capital in 2000 for a journalistic posting to Malaysia before moving to Singapore in 2003. He is a passionate collector of Indonesian textiles, an avid traveller and also a Facebook addict. Lewa started collecting textiles and beadwork from various islands and cultures in Indonesia in 1998 after being inspired by an Australian friend. Indonesia's extraordinary textile diversity is unmatched and his collection of more than 300 pieces from Sumatra to Papua is a tribute to the anonymous yet dedicated weavers in the sprawling archipelago.

Please visit the Textile Enthusiasts Group page on the FOM website to register for this event. Limited to 14 participants.



*Photos by Lewa Pardomuan*



New Rattan Collection



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Blk 16, #01-04/05 Dempsey Road  
Singapore 249685 Phone 6475-6941  
[www.emtradedesign.com](http://www.emtradedesign.com)

**Opening Hours**

Monday to Friday 10am - 7pm  
Saturday & Sunday 11am - 7pm  
[facebook.com/emgallery](https://facebook.com/emgallery)

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W: [www.shangantique.com.sg](http://www.shangantique.com.sg)

# Museum Information and Exhibitions

## Asian Civilisations Museum

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

### Opening hours:

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

### FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am and 2:00 pm, Fri 7:00 pm (English)  
Tues to Fri 10:30 am and every second Saturday 1:30 pm (Japanese)

### Understanding Asia through Singapore

The 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. The permanent galleries are arranged along broad themes that highlight cross-cultural connections, rather than being segmented by geography or culture.

The ACM connects the cultures of Asia across two broad themes: trade and the exchange of ideas, and faith and belief. Beginning with the ninth century Tang shipwreck, the galleries explore Southeast Asia as a trading hub. Chinese porcelain, Southeast Asian ceramics, Indian textiles and furniture are showcased along with the Asian luxuries that were in demand in the global market. Asia was also a source as well as a crossroads of faith and belief and the ACM galleries display works of art showing the development of ancient Indian faiths and the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism across Asia. Christianity and Islam in Asia reveal the Asian origin and evolution of these global faiths.

## Gillman Barracks

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

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

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

### FOM guided tours:

Sat 4:00 pm: Art & History Tour

Sat. 5:00 pm: History and Heritage Tour

To register please visit [www.fom-gillman-barracks.eventbrite.com](http://www.fom-gillman-barracks.eventbrite.com)

## Indian Heritage Centre

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

Open Tuesday to Sunday & public holidays. Closed on Mondays.

Tues to Thurs 10:00 am to 7:00 pm, Fri & Sat 10:00 am to 8:00 pm

Sundays & public holidays 10:00 am to 4:00 pm

### FOM guided tours: Tues-Fri

11:00 am for the main galleries

2:00 pm for the special exhibition

The Indian Heritage Centre 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.



## Symbols and Scripts – The Language of Craft

6 Dec 2017 – 30 Jun 2018

The exhibition showcases craft traditions from the Indian subcontinent in the context of Singapore's Indian communities. Traditionally, craftsmen have used signs, symbols, patterns and scripts in the decoration of handmade objects in the Indian Subcontinent for thousands of years. This exhibition presents iconic examples of craft traditions representing the material culture of Indian communities through craft forms across diverse media. It also examines the role of these crafts as trade objects and underscores the trading networks between South and Southeast Asia.

## Malay Heritage Centre

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

### Opening hours:

Tues to Sun 10:00 am – 6:00 pm (last admission 5:30 pm), closed on Mondays

FOM guided tours: Tues to Fri 11:00 am;

Sat: 2:00 pm (Subject to availability. Please call ahead to confirm the availability of a docent).

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

## National Museum of Singapore

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

### Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am – 7:00 pm

### FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am and 2:00 pm (English)

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

### The Singapore History Gallery

In celebration of 50 years of independence, this gallery has been refreshed with updated stories and content on Singapore's history, capturing the nation's defining moments, challenges and achievements from its earliest beginnings 700 years ago to the independent, modern city-state it is today.

Witness to War: Remembering 1942  
(through 25 March 2018)

FOM guided tours: Mon - Fri 11:30 a.m.

75 years after the fall of Singapore, rediscover this watershed event through a special international exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore. Hear first-hand accounts from witnesses to war: ordinary men and women whose lives were upheaved by the outbreak of hostilities in Singapore in 1942. The exhibition presents the complexities of the events that led to the fall of Singapore, paying homage to the extraordinary tenacity with which these men and women bore their circumstances.

## NUS Museum, NUS Centre for the Arts

University Cultural Centre  
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119279  
Tel: 6516 8817  
[www.museum.nus.edu.sg](http://www.museum.nus.edu.sg)

Free admission





# Museum Information and Exhibitions

## 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.

## Ng Eng Teng: 1+1=1

Through the motifs of spacing and difference, this exhibition features works by the artist Ng Eng Teng produced between 1958 and 2001. The title of the exhibition takes as its point of reference a series of sculptures developed by the artist during the 1990s. While the series 1+1=1 has not been seen as characteristic of Ng Eng Teng's practice, here it is proposed as an alternative point of entry into the artist's body of works.

## Always Moving: The Batik Art of Sarkasi Said (through Dec 2017)

An exhibition of batik works by Sarkasi Said from the 1990s to the present, this exhibition follows the personal development of Sarkasi's style and traces the history of his practice, from his days as itinerant street artist, to becoming a prominent batik artist. Sarkasi continues to uphold the foundational principles of the resist technique in batik even as he holds in tension conceptual perspectives between craft and contemporary practice

## NUS Baba House

157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883

Tel: 6227 5731

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

Visits by appointment only. Free-of-charge tours five times a week. Email [babahouse@nus.edu.sg](mailto:babahouse@nus.edu.sg) to reserve spaces.

## The Peranakan Museum

39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941

Tel: 6332 7591

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

## Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am - 7:00 pm

Fri 10:00 am - 9:00 pm

## FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am and 2:00 pm (English), Tues to Fri 10:30 am (Japanese), every second Wednesday of the month 10:45 am (French).

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.

## Singapore Art Museum

71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555

Tel: 6332 3222

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

## Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, Fri 10:00 am – 9:00 pm

## FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am and 2:00 pm, Fri 7:00 pm (English), Tues to Fri 10:30 am (Japanese)

The Singapore Art Museum focuses on international contemporary art practices, specialising in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Housed in a restored 19th century mission school, it opened its doors in 1996 as the first art museum in Singapore. Also known as SAM, the museum is now a contemporary art museum.

SAM has built one of the world's most important public collections of Southeast Asian contemporary artworks, with a growing component in international contemporary art. SAM draws from its collection and collaborates with international contemporary art museums to co-curate and present contemporary art exhibitions

## Cinerama: Art and the Moving Image in Southeast Asia (through March 2018)

*Cinerama* brings together 10 artists and collectives from across Southeast Asia who work through the medium of the moving image. Spanning hand-drawn animation to immersive video installations, the works explore the history of the genre, its current-day expressions, and potential for the future.

## STPI

41 Robertson Quay, Singapore 238236

Tel: 6336 3663

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

## Opening hours:

Mon to Fri: 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, Sat:

9:00 am – 6:00 pm

Closed Sundays & Public Holidays

FOM guided tours: Tues and Thurs, 11:30 am, Sat 2:00 pm

Please refer to STPI's website at [www.stpi.com.sg](http://www.stpi.com.sg) for STPI's public programmes.



## Alfredo & Isabel Aquilizan: Of Fragments and Impressions (through 11 November 2017)

*Of Fragments and Impressions* is a ground-breaking exhibition staged by STPI and award-winning Brisbane and Manila-based installation artist duo Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan in conjunction with STPI's 15th anniversary. Impressive in scale and pivotal in its undertaking, the extensive oeuvres see the prolific artists breaking new frontiers by transforming fragments of their widely acclaimed temporal installations into permanent material works for the very first time. From a sweeping installation of cardboard pulp and steel metal rods, to gritty shanty-town houses constructed from compressed cardboard, to spectacular large-scale cyanotype collages of wings, the artists turned the STPI gallery into a stellar showcase that embodies their decades-long practice.

## Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874

Tel: 6256 7377

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

## Opening hours:

Tues to Sun 10:00 am - 5:00 pm,

Closed on Mondays

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

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



## Stitches of Love: Hidden Blessings in Children's Clothing and Accessories (through March 2018)

A collaboration between Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and the Memorial Museum of Generalissimo Sun Yat Sen's Mansion in Guangzhou, this special exhibition showcases children's clothing and accessories from the late Qing to early Republican period. It reviews the wide range of images rich in symbolic meanings that were employed to bestow good fortune, longevity, male progeny, health, wealth and career success. The collection on display includes clothing, hats, ear muffs, bibs and shoes that feature a variety of motifs derived from the natural world, history, literature and folklore.

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



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