

Three Decades of Preserving Heritage



The National Collection

A Window into Singapore's History



Objects and artworks can hold the collective memories of a nation. These material and cultural legacies in turn provide a window into the 'soul' of a nation, revealing the origins and identities of its people, and the nature of its society at any given point in time.

ROOTS

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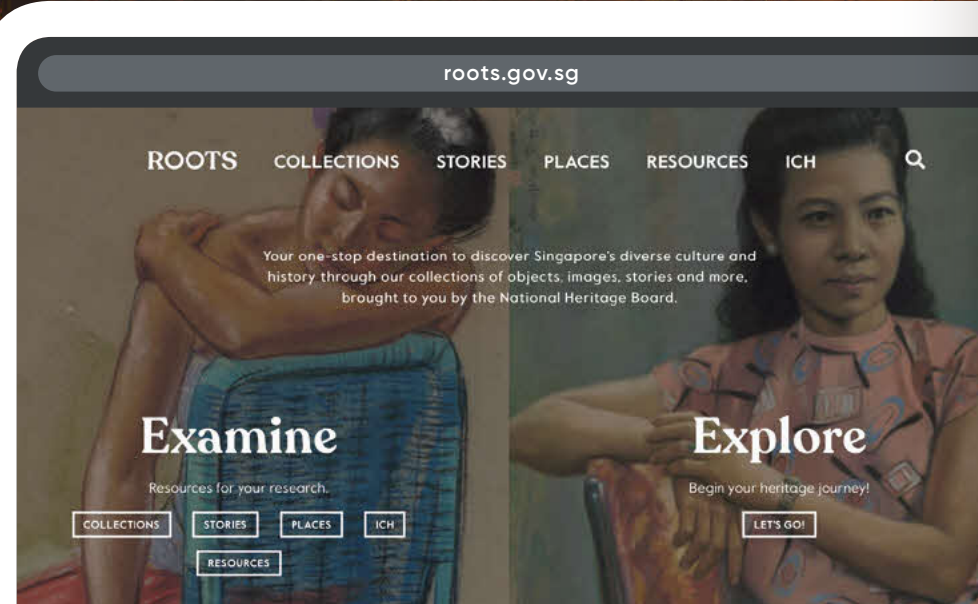
View of Singapore from Mount Wallich, 1856
Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

An Imitation of Grandeur

The Shanghai Plaster Story



Shanghai plaster is a type of cement-based finish developed in the late 19th century. Its innovation was facilitated by the widespread availability of modern Portland cement, a material patented in the UK in 1824. Prior to that, facades were mostly finished with a lime-based mortar with other materials.



PUBLISHER



National Heritage Board
61 Stamford Road,
#03-08, Stamford Court,
Singapore 178892

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Chang Hwee Nee

DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Alvin Tan (Policy & Community)

MUSE SG TEAM

Director
Gerald Wee (Education
& Community Outreach)

Editorial Consultant
Francis Dorai

Lead Editor
Fiona Lim

Managing Editors
Kelly Tan
Grace Huang

Contributors
Assoc Prof Maznah Mohamad
Angela Sim
Conan Cheong
Dominic Low
Dr Natalie Pang
Kathy Rowland
Muhammad Noor Aliff Bin Ghani
Selina Chong
Young Wei Ping

DESIGN & PRINT
MAKE

COVER IMAGE:
Montage of various recent National Heritage Board exhibitions, events and programmes.

Lantern Image: *Coming Home* – a contemporary installation by Sam Lo. Image courtesy of Peranakan Museum

Doraemon Image: THE DORAEMON EXHIBITION SINGAPORE 2022 ©Fujiko-Pro / Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore

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NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD

A note from the MUSE SG team

The National Heritage Board's (NHB) recent launch of Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 heralds an exciting next five years for Singapore's museum and heritage landscape. We open this issue by highlighting several notable initiatives of the strategic master plan.

One such initiative is NHB's continuing efforts to empower Singaporeans and residents to play an active role in the stewardship of the country's precious heritage. In particular, we learn about the experiences of five volunteers who spent six months in 2022 documenting stories of heritage businesses in Kampong Gelam as part of the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project.

Another of the master plan's initiatives promotes greater awareness of the nation's rich maritime heritage through recently salvaged artefacts from Singapore's waters. We look into how the artefacts recovered from the Temasek and *Shah Muncher* wrecks—which date to the mid-14th century and 1796 respectively—have yielded some of the most significant stories of Singapore's early trading history.

Over the past three decades, there is no doubt that the Singapore Heritage Society has been a leading voice for heritage advocacy in Singapore. We are privileged to have Dr Natalie Pang from the society pen a reflective piece on the development of the heritage group, sharing its challenges and successes, as well as its vision for the future of heritage in Singapore.

We also take an in-depth look at how the iconic *sarong kebaya* has evolved and modernised alongside societal expectations of women. Speaking of the *kebaya*, heritage enthusiasts and Peranakans will be delighted to know that the Peranakan Museum has finally reopened in February 2023 after a three-year-long revamp. We explore some highlights of the new permanent galleries spanning three storeys.

This issue features two research essays. The first is on the Hakka *qilin* dance whose propulsive, high-energy performance is a sight to behold, alongside an equally compelling history of the *qilin*—the mysterious chimera that is the star of the show. The second essay examines picture postcards, which were once hailed as the embodiment of modernity and used all over the world as a means of communication. But a closer look at some colonial-era postcards reveals structures of oppression against women.

Finally, we take a rare, behind-the-scenes peek into the world of exhibition production with Muhammad Noor Aliff Bin Ghani, NHB's collections and exhibitions manager. He shares how just mounting a single artefact and getting the lighting right can take many painstaking hours, in order to create the best viewing experience for visitors.

We hope this issue of *MUSE SG* will continue to deepen your understanding and appreciation of heritage. This issue will be the last in print and new *MUSE SG* articles will henceforth be hosted on NHB's heritage portal Roots.sg from 2024. We look forward to your continued support as we bring you more on NHB's work, expertise, and collections in the coming months.

We welcome your feedback. Scan the QR code to let us know what you think of *MUSE SG*.

You can also get in touch with us at muse@nhb.gov.sg



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Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0

Empowering the People

With the launch of Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0, the National Heritage Board charts the path forward for Singapore's museum and heritage sector for the next five years.

Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 is a five-year (2023–27) strategic blueprint for Singapore's museum and heritage sector.

A strong awareness of where we come from and our unique heritage helps connect us to our cultural roots. In turn, this can shape our personal and national identities.

Recognising the power of heritage to forge communal bonds and the people's sense of belonging to the nation, the National Heritage Board (NHB) launched Our SG Heritage Plan in 2018. This was a five-year master plan (2018–22) that charted the broad strategies and initiatives for Singapore's heritage and museum sector. Co-developed with the community, the master plan was the first of its kind implemented to celebrate and promote Singapore's national heritage.

Five years on, Our SG Heritage Plan has borne much fruit. In 2020, Singapore's hawker culture was inscribed into UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; the Street Corner Heritage Galleries project was piloted in Balestier,



Audiences at the Singapore Night Festival 2019 captivated by the New Orleans-style music of the Singapore-based New Stream Brass Band.

Kampong Gelam, Little India and Chinatown; and accessibility to our museums and heritage institutions for people with different needs was increased through a range of accessibility facilities, materials, and programmes. Much effort was also made to preserve significant historic locations in the city, with three national monuments and sites gazetted in recent years—The Padang, Fort Siloso and three bridges spanning the Singapore River. As a result, many Singaporeans have come to better appreciate their shared culture and heritage.¹

Building on this strong foundation, NHB launched Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 in May 2023. The new strategic roadmap will guide the development of the heritage and museum sector for the next five years, from 2023 to 2027. This second edition of the master plan envisions a dynamic future for the sector—one that celebrates the country's diverse cultural heritage, empowers the community to engage in their shared history, and embraces innovation and technology to ensure its relevance into the future.

Acknowledging the value and importance of engaging communities, Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 continues the consultative approach of its predecessor. Since June 2021, NHB consulted over 650 individuals to solicit

their views on the future of Singapore's heritage landscape. Altogether, over 50 engagement sessions were conducted with diverse representatives in the sector, such as community groups, traditional craft practitioners, youths, people in the creative fields, clan associations, academics, museum professionals and business associations.

Based on the feedback gathered from these sessions as well as NHB's research and analysis of data, four focus areas were identified: identity, community, industry and innovation. These were then shared with the wider public between August and November 2022 through online and physical channels, which saw over 72,000 responses to the proposed plan.

A public engagement campaign to solicit views for Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 was held from August to November 2022.



Identity

The first area of focus is Identity, which begs the question: ‘What makes Singapore, *Singapore*?’ One of the most compelling ways to build the national identity of Singaporeans is through the discovery of their roots—whether pertaining to the nation’s modern history or to its ancient trading links.

For instance, in recent years, sunken treasures from shipwrecks dating to the 14th century have been salvaged from Singapore waters (see box story on the right). By shining a spotlight on these archaeological discoveries and the nation’s maritime heritage, people will be able to connect to their more distant past—beyond Singapore’s well-documented colonial history.

NHB will also develop a design collection, which focuses on collectively telling the evolution and story of Singapore and the region’s design history. The highly anticipated collection will cover fashion, craft, product and industrial design, graphic design, architecture, and emerging multidisciplinary fields (see facing page).

Building on current NHB initiatives like Collecting Contemporary Singapore,² projects under the Identity building block will help uncover the multifaceted heritage collections that shaped Singapore’s identity, as well as recognise its locus in Southeast Asia.

Conserving Singapore's Maritime Heritage

Singapore’s maritime history, which dates back to the late 13th century, has invariably shaped much of the city-state’s national identity and its economic success. The nation’s port-city past is rich and diverse, and more of its storied history has been revealed in recent years through sunken treasures salvaged from ancient shipwrecks in its waters (see page 30).

These artefacts include rare blue-and-white porcelain wares dating from China’s Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), which were bound for the port of Temasek to be sold in the marketplace or exported elsewhere. These shipwreck treasures, coupled with similar archaeological land discoveries in the ancient Malay palace at Fort Canning, attest to Singapore’s significance as a thriving transshipment centre more than 700 years ago.

Plumbing the depths of Singapore’s maritime heritage also sheds light on the many seafaring communities or Orang Laut (people of the sea) who lived on the water and depended on the sea for their livelihoods. For instance, the Orang Seletar, named after their close links to the island of Pulau Seletar off the northern coast of Singapore, used to ply the Johor Strait (or Tebrau Strait) between Malaysia and Singapore

on their boats. Their vessels, known as the *pau kajang*, doubled up as homes and featured thatched roofs woven from pandan leaves. Daily sustenance comprised foraged foods such as yam, fruit, wild boar and seafood like mud crab and fish.

Other communities include the Orang Gelam, who lived on the Singapore River; the Orang Selat, who were closely associated with the southern islands; and the Orang Kallang who made the Kallang River their home. As Singapore modernised rapidly after independence in 1965, these seafaring folk either relocated to neighbouring Malaysia, or integrated into local Malay communities, giving up their former way of life.

Singapore’s maritime heritage as seen through its archaeological discoveries on both land and in its waters, as well as the origins of its seafaring communities, reveals aspects of the city-state that have been largely forgotten today. Conserving this facet of local heritage will remind Singaporeans and future generations of the country’s rich precolonial history, one that is closely tied to the seas and to the surrounding archipelagos of maritime Southeast Asia.

→ View of the Fashion and Textiles gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum. The gallery shows how identities and cross-cultural exchanges are revealed through dress.



↑ Ballgown with carnations and saz leaves from Andrew Gn’s Resort 2016 collection.

Courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum, photographed by Lenne Chai

Icons of Singapore: A Design Collection

Singapore has a lively design history despite it being a relatively young nation. A good number of products are conceived of and designed locally, some of which have become instantly recognisable icons today. Across the fields of fashion, jewellery, architecture, graphic design, product and industrial design, and visual communication, the local design landscape has become more dynamic and creative, maturing into one of the key drivers of the economy.

To document the journey of Singapore’s design history, NHB will develop a design collection focused on contemporary Singaporean designers and architects. Celebrating icons such as the Tiger Beer and POSB logos, and products like the ThumbDrive (another local invention that many people are unaware of), the collection will help expand the understanding of the Singaporean identity. Besides strengthening the National Collection with contemporary objects of creative expression, the new design collection will also augment the museums’ existing efforts to connect with the local design community and industry.

Some headway has already been made by the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in the fashion design landscape. In May 2023, ACM presented its first special exhibition spotlighting a contemporary Singaporean fashion designer, Andrew Gn: *From Singapore to the World*. The exhibition celebrates a generous gift of over 150 representative works by the Paris-based designer of haute couture, documenting the breadth of his illustrious career. The public can look forward to seeing more of such presentations for jewellery and other craft sectors in the near future.

BELOW

Yaziz Ahmad (far left), drum expert and co-founder of Malay drum ensemble NADI Singapura, demonstrating how the skin should be tightened on a traditional Malay hand drum in order to produce bright and crisp sounds.

BOTTOM

The Changi Chapel and Museum piloted a robot guide called Temi in 2022. Temi takes visitors on a tour of the exhibition while recounting the experiences of prisoners-of-war.

**Community**

The second area of focus—Community—aims to engage Singaporeans in shaping their shared heritage. Communities are without a doubt the lifeblood of NHB's work, and co-creation remains a cornerstone of the master plan. Whether it is by reaching out to young people, senior citizens or members of a specific interest group, the plan throws the door open to the wider community so that the public can take ownership of Singapore's heritage. As part of the plan, NHB will work with Singaporeans from all walks of life to co-create more heritage touchpoints as well as invite young people to be more involved in the heritage sector through volunteering opportunities, youth-targeted programmes and other initiatives.

Industry

The third focus area, Industry, aims to cultivate a vibrant heritage ecosystem that will create opportunities for Singaporeans, with the aim of showcasing the nation's heritage to a larger regional and global audience. NHB will work with overseas partners to present Singapore's heritage in various parts of the world. Such content includes exhibitions and programmes. By promoting Singapore's culture abroad, both physically and digitally, local designers and producers can potentially tap into new markets while the city's cultural institutions gain new audiences.

NHB will also continue to offer the Organisation Transformation Grant, which enables heritage businessowners in Singapore to adopt transformative and innovative efforts that will contribute to the long-term viability of their businesses, as well as support efforts to sustain local cultural trades and practices. In this way, such crafts and trades can be present and relevant for future generations of Singaporeans.

Co-creation and Citizen Engagement

Heritage belongs to everyone, and it is no surprise that communities are at the heart of NHB's heritage initiatives. As much as objects and artworks are crucial in the preservation of Singapore's national heritage, intangible aspects such as artistic, musical, craft and cultural traditions, as well as the stories and memories of the people are equally significant. Certainly, practitioners and communities keep heritage traditions alive, but ordinary citizens are also a precious storehouse of memories and knowledge.

Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 therefore expands on the efforts of its predecessor, to focus on engaging communities and tapping on their knowledge to collaborate on heritage projects. A new initiative that will be piloted over the next five years is the Heritage Activation Nodes, through which NHB hopes to seed more touchpoints in residential estates across the island by supporting ground-up initiatives by individuals, community groups and businessowners to document the heritage of their neighbourhoods and develop heritage-related activities in their locality.

Plans include partnering these groups to shape the use of public spaces as well as activate spaces in their estates through the organisation of programmes such as heritage craft workshops, street festivals, heritage trails, pop-up installations and exhibitions. Through such activities, the community can come together to share their stories and common experiences and in so doing, strengthen communal bonds and enliven public spaces. The knowledge gained and shared experiences in developing these initiatives will help people appreciate their fellow residents and estates, strengthening their sense of ownership, identity and connection to the area.

To enable the Heritage Activation Nodes, NHB will also provide support to grow the pool of local heritage volunteers by equipping them with relevant skills and involving them in the curation of neighbourhood spaces.

Another initiative that NHB will be expanding is the precinct-focused Street Corner Heritage Galleries. This programme involves close collaboration with heritage shopowners to create exhibitions that showcase their trades and the history of their businesses. So far, Street Corner Heritage Galleries have been rolled out in historic precincts such as Balestier, Kampong Gelam, Little India and Chinatown. Over the coming years, this initiative will be extended to the heartlands to support and document some of Singapore's lesser-known heritage crafts and businesses.

When it comes to heritage, every person, regardless of race, gender or age, is a steward of their nation's cultural roots. NHB's efforts at promoting citizen engagement in its heritage programmes are aimed at giving all Singaporeans a personal stake, empowering everyone to play a part in preserving and promoting the nation's shared identity, culture and heritage.

Innovation

Lastly, the plan will focus on Innovation, which will enable the heritage sector to keep up with shifts and changes in modern society. Visitors can expect to see even greater use of technology in museums, for example, to enhance their visit with a more immersive experience.

At the same time, there will be a stronger emphasis on sustainability in the heritage sector as the world confronts the climate crisis and other environment-related issues. NHB's museums and cultural institutions have recognised sustainability to be an important consideration. As such, they will commit to furthering existing efforts by adopting greener practices in their museum operations and exploring sustainable practices in caring for Singapore's historic landmarks and the National Collection, taking into consideration its tropical climate.

As Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 powers the nation's heritage and museum sector for the next five years, Singaporeans can look forward to a lively, inclusive and forward-looking heritage sector that is ready for the future and responsive to evolving socioeconomic trends. ●

NOTES

- 1 Results of the 2022 Heritage Awareness Survey show that, from 2018 to 2021, more Singaporeans felt proud of local heritage and culture, while there was also an increase in positive attitudes towards museums and heritage activities.
- 2 Collecting Contemporary Singapore is an initiative by the National Museum of Singapore to actively document and collect objects and artefacts relating to the present. The museum's collection will thus encompass a broader social history of Singapore as well as moments in the nation's recent history, including milestones and events that affect everyday life in Singapore.

A Dress for the Ages

The Sarong Kebaya

The way we dress can reflect how we see ourselves and influence how others perceive us. If so, how has the *sarong kebaya* evolved and what does it reveal about the place of Peranakan women in Singapore today?

Selina Chong

Assistant Director, National Collection,
National Heritage Board



→ A lady dressed in sarong kebaya, 1940s–50s.

Collection of Peranakan Museum.
Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee

The *sarong kebaya* is possibly one of the most visible expressions of Peranakan culture, both in Singapore as well as across the region. But the *sarong kebaya* that communities in Southeast Asia are familiar with is not unique to Peranakan culture. I have used Peranakan culture as the frame of reference in this article as it is the cultural heritage that I am most familiar with (interested readers may wish to explore other sources for insights into the *sarong kebaya* in the wider Nusantara region¹).

Coined in the late 18th century, the word 'sarong', meaning 'to wrap', refers to a long tubular cloth tied around the waist.² *Kebaya* is said to be derived from *qaba*, a jacket said to be of Turkic origins and worn at least since the 9th century by the ruling elite across the Middle East, Central Asia and North India. Another hint of the *kebaya's* Middle Eastern origins is found on the garment itself: a triangular patch under each arm of the *kebaya*—a feature also seen in traditional robes of the Middle East. Ming-style jackets, on the other hand, are flat-cut (without the gusset).

Today, different forms of the *sarong kebaya* continue to be made and worn by women across Southeast Asia. The garment is so well loved that Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand have come together to jointly submit a nomination to inscribe the *kebaya* on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in March 2023.

→ Former first lady Puan Noor Aishah (left) was commonly photographed wearing the *kebaya pendek* (short *kebaya*), 1970.

Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

→ An elderly lady dressed in a *sarong kebaya*, 1980s.

Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



As thinkers and writers have previously articulated, clothes do much more than protect our bodies from the physical elements. French philosopher and feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir describes the dynamics between attire and gender in society in her influential book, *The Second Sex*:³

A man's clothes, like his body, should indicate his transcendence and not attract attention; for him neither elegance nor good looks calls for his setting himself up as object; moreover, he does not normally consider his appearance as a reflection of his ego.

Woman, on the contrary, is even required by society to make herself an erotic object. The purpose of the fashion to which she is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to cut her off from her transcendence in order to offer her as prey to male desires: thus society is not seeking to further her projects but to thwart them.

Inspired by de Beauvoir and other feminists, this article explores what the *sarong kebaya* reveals or reflects about a woman's place in society.

Form and Function

Many researchers regard the *baju panjang* (literally 'long dress') as the precursor to the more familiar *sarong kebaya* that we recognise today. The *baju panjang* is typically a loose-fitting, calf-length tunic with sleeves that taper at the wrists. When

↗ A long tunic known as the *baju panjang* paired with a sarong (a long tubular skirt) from the early 20th century. This attire is regarded as the precursor to the *sarong kebaya*.
Collection of Peranakan Museum

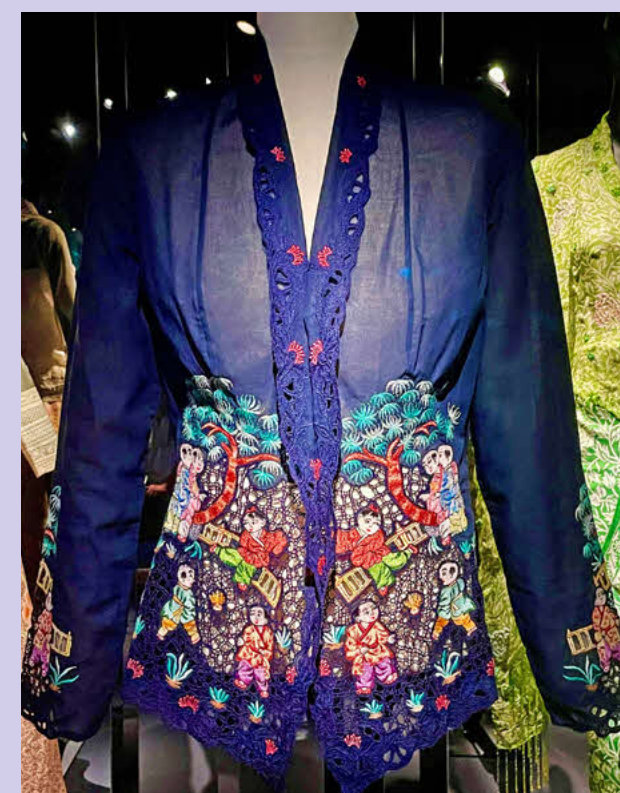
➡ A loose-fitting *kebaya* that was typically worn at home or for informal occasions, 1880s–1910s. The lightweight fabric and lace inserts suited the tropical climate.
Collection of Peranakan Museum.
Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee



paired with an ankle-length wrap or skirt (*sarong*), the *baju panjang* is fastened at the front with buttons or a brooch.

It was not just local women in the region who wore the *baju panjang* or *kebaya*. By the mid-19th century, European and Eurasian women in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) also began wearing *kebaya* made of white lace, pairing them with expensive cotton batik sarongs—a sartorial combination that hinted at status and privilege. Some of these *kebaya* featured lace inserts that provided comfort in the tropical climate of Southeast Asia.

Before the mid-19th century, the *kebaya* was relatively loose-fitting, particularly the versions worn at home or at informal occasions. From the 1850s onwards, however, a version of the *sarong kebaya* evolved into a tighter, more form-fitting garment.⁴ This development mirrored the decline of modest Victorian fashion for women in England as well as the gradual tightening of the silhouette as seen in the *cheongsam*, the body-hugging one-piece dress that was just taking off in China's fashionable cities.



Unlike the *baju panjang*, the *kebaya* was shorter—ending at the hips—and gently nipped in the waist. These minor adjustments had a flattering effect on the wearer's figure, highlighting her curves. The *kebaya* was also decorated with lace (*kebaya renda*) or embroidery (*kebaya sulam*), with the latter gaining greater prominence and popularity in tandem with the rising affluence and influence of the Straits-born Chinese Peranakan community. This led to the emergence of what we know now as the modern *kebaya*.

On the other side of the world, the accidental discovery of aniline dyes in 1856—the first commercial products of the synthetic chemical industry—revolutionised the manufacture of clothing. Prior to the introduction of chemical dyes, colour in clothing used to carry specific significance.

⬇ This checked *kebaya* features large floral motifs embroidered in shades of pink and outlined in white. It belonged to Mrs Kwok Swee Yong (1914–2016), who wore it in Java during the Japanese Occupation (1942–45).

Collection of Peranakan Museum.
Gift of the family of C. K. and S. Y. Kwok



⬅ This *kebaya* features the 'One Hundred Boys' motif, a popular pictorial subject in Chinese art signifying the wish for many children. The maker, Lim Swee Kim (1933–2014), was known for her technical mastery, particularly of designs depicting the human figure.

Collection of Peranakan Museum.
Gift of Mr A. D. Martin and Ms B. L. Fras



↑ A gold and diamond belt and buckle featuring peacocks, traditionally an Indian motif, in the main design of each panel.

Collection of Peranakan Museum. Gift of Edmond Chin

Yellow, for instance, was reserved for royalty during the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) in China, while saffron-dyed robes continue to define monastic orders in both Theravada Buddhist and Hindu traditions today. In Europe, richly coloured garments were worn by aristocrats and the middle class, in contrast to the working class who donned simple garments in dark monotone shades as an implicit form of protest against bourgeoisie excess.

With synthetic dyes, however, any hue imaginable was now possible with the careful calibration of chemicals. The affordability of aniline dyes also meant that anyone could now introduce colour to their wardrobes, tearing down barriers that once rendered some shades the preserve of certain classes.⁵

The proliferation of synthetic dyes was accompanied by another watershed development in the garment industry: the birth of ready-to-wear clothing in the 1850s. This was made possible by the invention of the sewing machine in the late 18th century, which in turn allowed for the mechanisation of garment-making.

However, the *kebaya* continued to be hand-sewn, in part because it was a traditional skill—alongside other aspects of domesticity such as cooking and cleaning—that were valued by Peranakan women. It was only after the Second World War, when the price of lace increased exponentially, that machine embroidery became more common. Similarly for *kebaya sulam*, elaborate embroidered patterns with cutwork could now be achieved in much less time. *Kebaya* designs thus flourished, limited only by the imagination and skill of their makers. From these developments emerged the form of the *sarong kebaya* as we know it today—in a diverse combination of colours and embroidered patterns.

The myriad options of the *sarong kebaya* enabled women to express their identities through what they wore. Within the Straits-born Chinese Peranakan community, the outfit of a *nyonya*⁶ took on great significance. While a *baba* had access to academic and career opportunities because men were held in high esteem in traditional Chinese society, a *nyonya*'s place in life was one of domestication and cultivated

gentility. To a large extent, a *nyonya* was seen as a reflection of her family's status: she was expected to be submissive and carry herself with appropriate decorum. How she dressed—from the design of her *kebaya* to how she accessorised with jewellery—was a public statement of her family's wealth and social status.

The gold and diamond belt above, for example, would have been worn by a *nyonya* to complement her *sarong kebaya*. The belt was probably made by South Asian craftsmen for a wealthy *nyonya* around the beginning of the 20th century. It comprises 18 linked gold pierce-work panels, each bearing the image of a peacock surrounded with a profusion of vegetation. The buckle and smaller side panels feature diamonds of yellow, brown and even orange-pink tints. In the centre of the buckle is a large European-cut diamond set in the body of the peacock. The buckle, which weighs in at nearly five carats, can be detached and worn as a brooch. This is not only an ostentatious piece of jewellery featuring intricate craftsmanship, but was also worn to show off the wealth of the wearer and her family.



Gender as a Social Construct

One of the most quoted statements about gender—“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman”⁷—is attributed to Simone de Beauvoir. Her statement speaks to how gender identity, as with any other identity one holds, can be expressed and constituted through language, gesture and dress, among other things.

An example is the literal performance of gender—when dress and costume are used by an actor to assume a different identity. In the novel *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf writes:⁸

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us... There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.

The construction of gender through sartorial means is central in *wayang peranakan*, which is traditionally performed by Chinese Peranakan men in Baba Malay, a creole spoken by the community. This theatrical form was derived from a blend of Chinese *wayang* (opera) and *bangsawan*, a popular form of Malay theatre.



↶ A group of male *wayang peranakan* performers dressed in female clothing. Female impersonation was, and still is, a distinct feature of this theatrical form.

Collection of Peranakan Museum. Gift of Francis Hogan

↶ A *sarong kebaya*-clad Ivan Heng playing the titular character in *Emily of Emerald Hill*, 2019.

Courtesy of Wild Rice

Female impersonation was a distinctive feature of *wayang peranakan* as it was considered improper at the time for Chinese Peranakan women to be seen on stage. *Baba* performers of *wayang peranakan* would dress in women's attire such as the *sarong kebaya* and adopt coquettish poses and high-pitched voices. While contemporary stagings of Peranakan theatre today routinely feature actresses, it is not unusual to find men still taking on the odd female role or two.

Singaporean thespian Ivan Heng's highly acclaimed performance in 1999 as the titular character in *Emily of Emerald Hill* was a nod to *wayang peranakan*. This was a role that Heng has reprised several times since, the last in 2019. Written in 1982 by Stella Kon, the monologue centres on a *nyonya* matriarch who devotes her life to her family, yet finds that she loses what she loves most in the end.

In 2019, to celebrate the opening of the Ngee Ann Kongsi Theatre @ WILD RICE, Raymond Wong, a veteran practitioner of Peranakan beadwork and embroidery, created beautiful *sarong kebaya* outfits for the restaging of the play. To symbolise Emily's resilience through all the hardships she endures in her life, Wong stitched together a *kebaya* with embroidered chrysanthemums, a flower that blooms even in harsh weather. The outfit was key to Ivan Heng's embodiment of the character of Emily Gan: wrapped in a vividly coloured *sarong kebaya*, the actor channelled the indomitable spirit of the matriarch to critical acclaim.

Contemporary Expressions of the *Kebaya*

The *sarong kebaya* has never ceased evolving; its shape and style continue to change with the passage of time, reflecting shifting societal norms. Needless to say, women in Singapore today have much greater autonomy than in the past. They enjoy privileges that were not afforded to their mothers and grandmothers, such as access to education and opportunities in the workplace. What

this means is that many women have the financial means to buy what they want, decide what they want to do and are empowered to express their identities in myriad ways, including fashion. But while there is generally a growing appreciation among younger Singaporeans for their cultural heritage in terms of tradition, food and dress, in an era dominated by fast fashion, does the *sarong kebaya* still resonate with the modern Chinese Peranakan woman?

Personally, I believe so. The *sarong kebaya* remains a highly visible identity marker for me as a Chinese Peranakan woman. While not every person who dons the '*nyonya style*' *sarong kebaya* will identify as Chinese Peranakan, it is still a source of joy and immense pride for me to witness how an ensemble of textiles can convey so much about identity, symbolism, artistic expression and exquisite craftsmanship.

Of course, I also look forward to the day that the *sarong kebaya* is perceived less as an occasion wear. I see sparks of that when I walk into Kebaya by Ratianah along Bussorah Street and hear owner and *kebaya* maker Ratianah Binte Mohd Tahir sharing passionately about her work. I celebrate when local and international designers play on the versatility of the *kebaya* and create inspired works that women can wear any day.⁹ I find every opportunity to support local makers because we—as a society—are at risk of losing the technical skills and expertise of our artisans and crafts(wo)men. 🍀

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This article was updated on 15 August 2023 to correct inaccuracies in the original version.

NOTES

- 1 A good place is the National Heritage Board's Intangible Cultural Heritage inventory (<https://www.roots.gov.sg/en/ich-landing/ich/Kebaya>).
- 2 Peter Lee, 'Sarong and Kebaya: The Spectrum of Hybridity in Peranakan Fashion and Identity, 1600-1950' in *Singapore, Sarong Kebaya and Style: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2016), 10.
- 3 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 1098.
- 4 Other forms of the garment, e.g., *kebaya labuh* (long kebaya), also continued to be worn by women.
- 5 It should be noted that chemical dye production has led to widespread water pollution. Some sources estimate that the fashion industry is responsible for up to 20 percent of industrial water pollution in producer countries such as Bangladesh, and wastewater—which can contain carcinogenic chemicals and heavy metals—is commonly discharged directly into rivers and streams, eventually flowing into seas and oceans, decimating ecosystems.
- 6 Chinese Peranakan women are commonly referred to as *nyonya*, while the men are called *baba*.
- 7 de Beauvoir, 2010, 555.
- 8 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Alma Books, 2014), 176.
- 9 The Peranakan Museum showcases a few such examples.

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Kebaya



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Put on your best *kebaya*, snap a picture and share it with us at #WeHeartKebaya.



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Keeping Heritage Alive

The Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project

MUSE SG shines a light on the National Heritage Board's volunteer-driven project, which has galvanised a group of heritage enthusiasts to help chronicle the stories behind time-honoured businesses in the historic enclave.

↑ Hjh Maimunah Restaurant and Catering, a *nasi padang* (rice with mixed dishes) eatery, is one of the businesses whose heritage has been documented through the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project.

What gives a place its identity? Architecture certainly plays a large part, giving an area its outward structure and appearance. But the heart and soul of a place can be said to derive from the residents, businesses and other inhabitants who make up the community. The historic precinct of Kampong Gelam, for instance, is home to many businesses that have been around for decades, some even handed down through several generations.

Ranging from *nasi padang* (rice with mixed dishes) shops to perfumeries, these diverse trades and businesses have become vital to the unique identity of Kampong Gelam. Today, they exist alongside relative newcomers to the precinct, such as cafes, bars, restaurants and boutiques. Unfortunately, some heritage businesses have also been lost over the years. This can be attributed to a range of factors, such as increased rental costs in the area and the challenge of finding suitable successors to take over the business.



↑ **TOP**
Basharahil Bros Batik, a participating business in the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project, has been in the batik trade for over 80 years.

ABOVE
Volunteers for the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project attended training sessions to equip them with the necessary skills for conducting interviews.

As Kampong Gelam's 'living heritage' is what gives the enclave its distinctive flavour, it is important to celebrate its traditional crafts and businesses. With this in mind, the National Heritage Board (NHB) teamed up with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) to launch the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project. Aimed at documenting the heritage of these businesses, the project complements URA's Kampong Gelam Place Plan, a long-term strategic blueprint of the precinct's planned development.

What was remarkable about this pilot project was its volunteer-driven nature. This was a conscious decision by NHB to create opportunities for the public to participate in heritage projects and

to foster a greater sense of collective ownership of the nation's cultural legacies.

NHB put out an open call in March 2022 for volunteers to be part of the project, and received an overwhelming response. The team eventually narrowed down the selection to 47 volunteers from diverse backgrounds—the youngest was a 23-year National Serviceman (see profile on page 22), while the most senior was a retiree in her 60s. But what truly connected these individuals was their shared enthusiasm for learning about the history of Kampong Gelam.

The volunteers were grouped into pairs or threes to interview and photograph business owners and their shops. To equip them with the necessary skills to conduct interviews, NHB organised training sessions and workshops for the volunteers. The interviews took place over several sessions across six weeks, with the participation of 45 diverse heritage businesses (scan the QR code at the end of the article to read more about them).

The precarity of these businesses was a painful reality that could not be ignored: of the 45 businesses featured in the project, three closed down within a year since the project began in 2022. This development made it all the more urgent to document and support the remaining businesses.

The Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project culminated in a textual and photographic documentation of selected heritage businesses. Published on NHB's portal, Roots.sg, in the form of a digital map, it is hoped that the stories collected by volunteers about the people and heritage of these businesses will commemorate the area's identity and enable the public to pay greater attention to the shops in Kampong Gelam that have been around for decades.

Alongside the Citizen Engagement Project, NHB also offers the Organisation Transformation Grant to heritage trades and businesses. The grant aims to support the sustainability of these businesses



TOP
Volunteers speaking to the owner of Aik Bee Textile Co., a textile shop on Arab Street that is now run by the second generation.

ABOVE
Volunteers interviewing the owner of Haji V Syed Abu Thahir Trading, which has been providing essentials and supplies for the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages since the original business was founded in 1924.

by encouraging innovation. One of the recipients in Kampong Gelam was Jamal Kazura Aromatics, which used the grant to create an online presence. Originally founded in 1933, the business started out in Kampong Gelam as a general trade store known as Kazura Company and is currently helmed by the third generation.

Another initiative that supports efforts to raise awareness and foster a deeper appreciation for heritage businesses is Street Corner Heritage Galleries. Under this scheme, NHB works closely with owners of local shops with at least 30 years of history in historic precincts such as Kampong Gelam to curate 'mini-museum' display cases on their premises that showcase the history and heritage of their businesses and trades. Featuring their stories, augmented with historical documents, photographs, and artefacts, these displays help promote greater awareness of trades that are under threat. They also offer casual passers-by more opportunities to encounter the enclave's living heritage.

Collectively, these initiatives aim to keep the rich legacies of Kampong Gelam alive. While it is impossible to guarantee the survival of all its heritage businesses, these efforts will hopefully go some way in raising public awareness and helping them become more sustainable in the long term. 🍀

MUSE SG speaks to four volunteers about their experiences with the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project.

Muhammad Fuad bin Johari, 34 Civil Servant



For Fuad, Kampong Gelam is a place of special, personal connections. He cherishes fond memories of visiting the area as a child for weekly Friday prayers at Sultan Mosque and enjoying hearty meals thereafter at nearby Warong Nasi Pariaman. During special occasions like Hari Raya Puasa, Fuad and his family would visit his late grandmother's shophouse residence on Bussorah Street.

Over the years, Fuad developed a keen interest in his family history, which, as it turned out, was closely linked to the neighbourhood. His great-grandmother lived in a house within the compound of Istana Kampong Gelam, the Malay palace that once used to be the home of the royal descendants of Sultan Hussein Shah, the last sultan of the Johor-Riau-Lingga empire. Part of the compound and the palace today houses the Malay Heritage Centre.

When Fuad came across the open call soliciting volunteers for the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project, he naturally jumped at the opportunity to discover more about the precinct. "I wanted to know more about the people's history of the neighbourhood—who lived there and what they did," Fuad explained.

Rumah Makan Minang, an eatery on Kandahar Street specialising in *nasi padang* (rice with mixed dishes), was the one of the businesses Fuad was assigned to. While interviewing the owners, he serendipitously discovered that the matriarch of the family business, Mdm Zubaidah Marlian, knew his mother and that both were rather close when they used to live in the area.

Fuad recalled listening to stories from his grandmother and grandaunt about their lives in Kampong Gelam when he was growing up. One of the heartening things he discovered while working on the project was how the warmth and close ties of the Kampong Gelam community were kept since the time of his grandmother: "The neighbourhood was always important to the Malay Muslim community, and there is still such a palpable sense of camaraderie within Kampong Gelam. At my grandmother's funeral, so many of her friends from Kampong Gelam turned up."

But what stood out most to him was the business owners' spirit of resilience and gumption. This was perhaps best exemplified by Mdm Zubaidah and her son Hazmi, who shared with Fuad how they gamely pivoted their business to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic by selling takeaway food and ready-made spice pastes. Fuad shared:

Hearing the first-hand accounts of how these traditional businesses struggled financially amid the pandemic and skyrocketing rents, as well as grappled with succession issues, I developed a new-found respect for these business owners. They continued to persevere despite the challenges. It was a truly humbling experience.

Working on the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project proved to be an invaluable experience for Fuad. It gave him a close-up view of the joys and woes of running a decades-old business in Kampong Gelam, and affirmed the importance of preserving the distinct identity of the precinct, one that is so full of colour and life.



↑ Muhammad Fuad bin Johari (left) with Mdm Zubaidah Marlian and her son Hazmi. The duo helm Rumah Makan Minang, an eatery on Kandahar Street specialising in *nasi padang*.



Fistri Abdul Rahim, 48 Business Development Consultant

While some of us may occasionally spend an afternoon on the weekend leisurely wending through the streets and alleys of Kampong Gelam, Fistri would be faithfully in the precinct every other week. For more than seven years, she has been a volunteer docent at the Malay Heritage Centre,¹ leading groups of visitors on guided tours of the exhibitions.

As a Malay Muslim born in Singapore, Fistri is no stranger to the area, which has long been a cultural node for her community. Growing up, she and her family frequented Bussorah Street for the bustling Ramadan bazaar held in front of the Sultan Mosque. With a strong passion for Malay history and heritage, Fistri was a natural fit for the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project.

Over the years, Fistri has observed the changing demographics of Kampong Gelam, both in terms of the business owners as well as the throngs of visitors and customers who visit the enclave. Each time she finds out that yet another heritage business has closed down, she becomes emotional. The main reasons, she shared, were the high rental costs and the lack of a successor to take over the business or trade from the older generation.

One of the businesses that put up its shutters in recent years was the Malay Art Gallery,² which had been one of the



Fistri Abdul Rahim (left) and another volunteer interviewing the owner of Halijah Travels Pte Ltd, a travel agency that specialises in organising Islamic religious pilgrimages.

Courtesy of Siti Nur Farah Sheikh Ismail

few remaining brick-and-mortar shops specialising in the *keris*—a traditional Malay dagger that functions as a weapon and spiritual object which is believed to be imbued with magical powers. Fistri lamented the loss of a culturally significant object like the *keris* in modern Singapore:

The keris is rooted in Southeast Asia and has great symbolic meaning in Malay culture. Malay men, and even women, used to carry a keris with them every day. However, the dagger has fallen out of favour today, and traditional businesses like the Malay Art Gallery struggle to survive. And, of course, the keris is not something that you can carry around in public anymore as it is considered a weapon.

When the Malay Art Gallery shut its doors for good in 2019 and moved its business online, Fistri bemoaned its loss. She sees her involvement in the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project as a means of actively contributing to the documentation and support of such heritage businesses while they still exist and helping to stem the threat of their fading into oblivion.

What Fistri found particularly remarkable while working on the project were the diverse backgrounds of her fellow volunteers in terms of age, ethnicity, religion, profession and languages spoken. Even though many of the volunteers were not from the Malay Muslim community, they shared her enthusiasm when it came to preserving the heritage of the precinct. Fistri said:

The most beautiful thing about the volunteering experience was the mutual help we rendered to each other and our strong sense of community and camaraderie. All of us shared a common goal, and we worked towards it together.

In a sense, the demographics of the volunteers mirrors the cosmopolitan, tightly knit community of Kampong Gelam today. Working alongside so many other kindred spirits was, to Fistri, an incredibly precious experience.



Ng Wee Liang, 24 Undergraduate

Wee Liang remembers his earliest encounter with heritage—a school excursion to Chinatown and Little India as a seven-year-old in Primary 1. Of course, back then, his young mind did not register the concept of heritage. But as he grew up, Wee Liang developed a keen interest in local architecture and heritage.

This led the first-year undergraduate to become deeply involved in several heritage projects over the years, such as a cultural mapping of Queenstown estate. In 2022, just a few months before completing National Service and with some time to spare on his hands, Wee Liang joined the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project, becoming the group's youngest volunteer. "It was my way of serving my country," he said.

As a result of his work on the Kampong Gelam project, Wee Liang has been inspired to view heritage more holistically and look beyond its built heritage: he now takes into consideration the unique makeup of each neighbourhood, including its shops and business owners. He shared:

In my free time I like to go around documenting places and buildings. I do visit Kampong Gelam quite often to observe its built environment. But in the past, I didn't pay much attention to the businesses operating there. Since working on the Kampong Gelam project, however, I have a newfound appreciation for the shops that have been there for so long. These businesses give the place so much character.

Wee Liang spends much of his time exploring Singapore's built heritage with his camera in tow, largely influenced by the late architect and photographer Lee Kip Lin:

My photography work is very much inspired by Lee Kip Lin. What appears mundane today may in fact be gone tomorrow. I do not wish to take our environment for granted, especially in a place like Singapore where change happens so quickly.

Wee Liang believes that education and sparking people's interest in heritage are important first steps to developing a society that values heritage. These will then have a positive knock-on effect of creating a community of robust heritage advocates.

To expand public awareness of Singapore's built heritage, Wee Liang takes to social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram,³ where he frequently posts heritage-related content such as the origins of place names, architectural features and urban changes, as well as his photographs of places and buildings that he finds interesting.

Wee Liang shared that his audiences are mostly youths, and finds it heartening that there is a growing interest in heritage and culture among younger people in Singapore. With the continued work of dedicated heritage enthusiasts like Wee Liang who actively take ownership of Singapore's shared heritage, we can look to the future of local heritage preservation with much optimism.



↑ Ng Wee Liang with Mr Darshan Singh (left), the owner of Rishi Handicrafts, a shop that sells rattan goods, and his teammate Kai Yee.



Monalisa Barai, 30 Civil Engineer

When Monalisa and her family relocated from India to Singapore in June 2020, the city-state was experiencing the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As much as she wanted to be quickly acquainted with all the quirks and idiosyncrasies of her newly adopted home, everywhere she went was largely devoid of life due to safety and health restrictions—including Kampong Gelam.

Even before she came to Singapore, Monalisa had heard about the historic enclave: she had read about this vibrant food-and-beverage hub that coexisted with generations-old businesses in a conserved urban landscape filled with colonial-era shophouses. But the Kampong Gelam she visited during the height of the pandemic was a depressing sight: the shops were shuttered and it was practically a ghost town.

Two years later, as pandemic restrictions gradually eased and having spent much of the interim period in isolation, the heritage enthusiast gamely signed up for the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project. Though she is a relative newcomer to Singapore, Monalisa saw it as a great opportunity to experience the precinct on an intimate level. She explained, "I thought the project was a meaningful way of getting to know the city—by speaking to the people, the community who make up Kampong Gelam."

The project was not her first foray into heritage-related work. When she was an engineer in New Delhi, India, working with a team to build highways, Monalisa collaborated with heritage organisations to study historically important buildings along the planned routes. This was to ensure that the highway construction would not damage culturally significant edifices

near or along its path. To Monalisa, the conservation of heritage is almost sacred: "Without heritage, we do not have an identity. Therefore, it is imperative that we do what we can to protect it."

Monalisa found the three-month-long Kampong Gelam project to be very meaningful as it revealed to her many personal narratives of people whom she might not have otherwise come across. After each interview, she would ruminate over it for weeks, digesting the information and stories that she had been privy to. Monalisa shared:

Speaking to the business owners showed me another side of Singapore that I probably would not have come across otherwise. As a customer at a shop, we never know what goes on behind the scenes, such as the owner's woes and struggles. It is only after we engage with people deeply that we get to know their stories. Working on the project gave me a chance to do exactly that.

Even though Monalisa is a foreigner, she said that the humanism that radiated from her interviewees was universal. Listening to the crests and troughs of the life of a small businessowner revealed to her the complexities of life in a megapolis like Singapore, where the old constantly has to keep pace with the new in order to survive and thrive.

Monalisa believes that much work is still required to safeguard the future and identity of heritage businesses given the unrelenting march of modernity. For her, the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project was the perfect start to helping out in her new home.

NOTES

- 1 The Malay Heritage Centre is closed for a revamp until 2025.
- 2 Though the Malay Art Gallery closed its physical shop, it still operates online.
- 3 Wee Liang's TikTok and Instagram handles are @ngweeliang_.

Read the stories of the 45 businesses documented in the Kampong Gelam Citizen Engagement Project



Heritage Advocacy in Singapore

From Hands to Hearts

What does it mean to be an independent voice for heritage conservation? Dr Natalie Pang reflects on the role the Singapore Heritage Society has played in shaping public perceptions of heritage since its inception in 1987.

Dr Natalie Pang
Executive Committee Member, Singapore Heritage Society



↑ Researcher and Singapore Heritage Society volunteer Fauzy Ismail describing the history of Masjid Jamae Chulia to participants during the society's Bicentennial Walking Workshop, 2019.

Courtesy of See Kian Wee

The Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) was founded in April 1987 as a nonprofit, nongovernmental organisation and charity to promote heritage conservation in Singapore. Initiated by the late William Lim, together with Kwa Chong Guan, Dr Sharon Siddique and Geraldene Lowe, SHS aims to be a champion of the city's built heritage and a facilitator of public discourse on heritage-related issues.

SHS has always strived to be an independent voice for heritage issues in Singapore. Guided by its vision, "Giving a Future to Our Past", the society defines heritage as "the living presence of the past". What this means is we see Singapore's history as always understood and explored in ways that inform the present and the future. Heritage is about being connected to Singapore's collective identity as we make sense of our past, but this is also a continual work in progress. Heritage never stands still: it is dynamic and always unfolding.

Some 35 years have passed since the founding of SHS, and this is an opportune time to reflect on the society's work and its impact over the years. To provide some context, let me share how I became involved with the organisation.

I first encountered SHS in early 2011 when I was invited by anthropologist Dr Hui Yew-Foong to discuss the documentation of Bukit Brown Cemetery. SHS would later play a crucial role in the research and the rallying of fieldworkers for the documentation of this historically important site. Its efforts inspired the development of All Things Bukit Brown, a group of concerned citizens and heritage enthusiasts with whom SHS has worked closely to this day.

I was not part of All Things Bukit Brown or SHS then, but these activities spurred me to sign up as a member of SHS later that same year. Subsequently, during my time at the Institute of Policy Studies, I guided the development of the research project 'Perceptions of Built Heritage and Landmarks'¹ to better understand the public's views on built heritage and

landmarks in Singapore. My involvement in SHS grew over the years, and in 2019 I was elected as an executive committee member. The following reflections are mostly driven by my time as a member of SHS since 2011.

The Heritage Society's Early Years

Since its founding in 1987, the society's primary work and activities have been grounded in advocacy, research and public education. In line with this, SHS has organised numerous conferences and public talks, and produced literature for public education.

In 1992, the society came up with a report for then Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo to establish a heritage trust in Singapore. The report advocated for heritage to be viewed as a fundamental step in Singapore's development journey. Together with recommendations from the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, these efforts reflected a growing realisation of the importance of heritage in the evolution of the Singaporean identity. It was with this in mind that the National Heritage Board (NHB) was formed in 1993.

Apart from developing and operating museums in Singapore, NHB is also the official custodian of the nation's heritage. In this regard, it has worked with SHS to raise awareness of Singapore's cultural heritage. One good example is the development of NHB's first heritage trail—the Civic District Heritage Trail—in 1999,² for which SHS provided support. The work on this heritage trail would pave the way for the development of numerous other walking tours by SHS, including the 'Bicentennial Walking Workshop: Multicultural Historic Places of Worship & Heritage' in 2017 and 2018.

The development of the Singapore Heritage Festival, inaugurated in 2004, was another area that SHS and NHB collaborated on. Over the years, the society has organised talks, workshops and guided tours as part of the festival offerings.

2011: A Watershed Year for Heritage Citizenry

While the impact on the ordinary citizen is often considered, discourse on heritage largely takes place—in Singapore and everywhere else in the world—among professionals such as academics, policymakers, heritage-related practitioners and activists. The year 2011, however, proved to be a turning point for heritage discourse in Singapore: two major conservation issues—the former Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) Railway and Bukit Brown Cemetery—caught the public imagination as a result of SHS's advocacy work.



The KTM Railway ceased operations in 2011 following an agreement between the governments of Malaysia and Singapore. The 26-kilometre-long track, Singapore's first railway line with a history dating back to 1903, lay fallow while the authorities pondered over its redevelopment. Opened in 1922, Bukit Brown Cemetery was the first Chinese municipal cemetery established by the colonial government. The cemetery was officially closed in 1973, and the construction of a highway that would slice across Bukit Brown Cemetery was announced in 2011.

In both cases, the society released detailed research papers and participated in committees and workgroups coordinated

↑ Partial view of the tomb of wealthy businessman Ong Sam Leong (1857–1918) and his wife, 2013. This is the largest—and possibly the most elaborate—tomb in Bukit Brown Cemetery.

Photo by Jnzl. Retrieved from Flickr

by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). These forms of advocacy were not new for SHS. In 2000, for instance, it published *Rethinking Chinatown*, which documented the society's findings about the redevelopment of the enclave. But it was how the KTM Railway and Bukit Brown Cemetery conservation issues captured public attention in unprecedented ways that drove the society to further develop its work in public outreach and education.

In the case of the KTM Railway, advocates took to Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo, blogs and image-sharing sites such as Flickr to mobilise the public to support what we now know as the Rail Corridor. These platforms were used to share people's memories, which in turn created a groundswell of interest and spurred many others to also talk about their memories and experiences of the old railway line. Soon, the subject took on a life of its own.



↑ The Singapore Railway Heritage online interactive map was part of Singapore Heritage Society's research and documentation project of the KTM Railway. Courtesy of Singapore Heritage Society

At the same time, SHS, with the support of URA, initiated a research and documentation project. This comprised a built heritage conservation survey, photo-documentation and geographic information system mapping of the site, including an interactive map as an online resource, to build greater awareness as well as encourage public interest in the redevelopment plans for the railway line.

In much the same way, news about plans to redevelop parts of Bukit Brown Cemetery into a major road stirred the public into action. The formation of All Things Bukit Brown in 2011 by a group of concerned citizens and heritage enthusiasts enabled volunteers to help families locate burial

plots of their forebears, organise walking tours, and rally members of the public as well as interested stakeholders to support the conservation of the cemetery.

The work carried out by members of All Things Bukit Brown and the wealth of knowledge amassed, especially for families whose ancestors' remains were buried at the cemetery, have been exemplary. The level of citizen voluntarism and engagement at Bukit Brown is a shining example of how heritage can inspire ordinary people to work together in spite of their vastly different backgrounds.

It could be that conditions back in 2011, which coincided with the rise of social media, were ripe for the kind of massive support and participation seen in both cases. Nevertheless, it was reflective of the active heritage citizenry that had begun emerging then.³ It also bears noting that SHS had been making the case for the heritage value of cemeteries in Singapore since 2001 when it was first announced that Bidadari Cemetery would be exhumed.⁴

Today, there is recognition that the value of Bukit Brown extends well beyond the tracing of genealogies and an understanding of old burial rituals. As former SHS executive committee member Dr Terence Chong noted in the society's position paper on Bukit Brown:⁵

Bukit Brown is valuable to the nation-building project... the struggle for Bukit Brown goes beyond saving a few graves or greenery. It is the struggle for the soul of Singapore. The decisions we make will determine the value we place on our collective identity, our multi-textured heritage and our sense of belonging.

The conservation of the KTM Railway and Bukit Brown echo the sentiment that heritage is ultimately about our collective identity as Singaporeans—an intimate tapestry of connections, stories and meanings that make us all part of a larger community.

Advocacy for the Long Term

Over the years, SHS has continued to engage government stakeholders to provide feedback on key urban redevelopment plans. But given limited time and resources, public consultation exercises can be challenging. By the time the public reacts to the announcement of redevelopment plans for sites like Tanglin Halt, Dakota Crescent, Rochor Centre and Sungei Road flea market, it is usually too late. It is also difficult to ascertain how much time is required for proper feedback and consultation; sieving through the necessary documents and undertaking research is a slow and painstaking process.

Yet, to plunge ahead with major development projects without understanding the social, cultural and historical implications would be reckless. Since 2013, to mitigate the risks, SHS has advocated for all potential redevelopment sites to be assessed first according to a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) framework. In March 2022, we welcomed the news of an HIA framework put in place by URA.⁶

As a result of this framework, stakeholders as well as concerned members of the public would be better informed about the impact of any redevelopment plan, and consequently able to identify relevant mitigation measures. There are challenges ahead, of course: universities and professional bodies will have to build capacity among young Singaporeans to carry out and participate in the implementation of the framework, and various stakeholders have to be consulted to solicit meaningful and timely feedback.

It must be stressed that any assessment of the potential impact of redevelopment and the corresponding solutions to mitigate its negative effects is not an easy feat. Such work requires specialised knowledge of the site, a keen understanding of issues relating to intangible aspects of heritage and deft management of the tensions between communities with diverse and sometimes opposing objectives. The HIA framework should not be viewed as

a mere management tool but as a platform to connect and develop communities where possible.

Advocacy work relating to built heritage and national landmarks, and facilitating public discourse on conservation issues, is par for the course at SHS. Public engagement in the last decade has also taken on many other forms. One example is the release of the society's position paper 'Too Young to Die'. Led by SHS Executive Director Dr Chua Ai Lin, the paper shines a spotlight on strata-titled modernist buildings erected in the early years of Singapore's independence, an issue that has received relatively less attention in terms of heritage conservation.

The paper, which called for the re-evaluation of current land-use policies and regulatory frameworks to consider the conservation of several modernist buildings, was also the basis for an exhibition on Singapore's modernist icons in September 2018 at The Substation. In 2020, SHS had the privilege of having filmmakers Tan Wei Ting and Kirsten Tan dedicate their film *Still Standing* to the society. *Still Standing* tells the story of pioneering architect Tan Cheng Siong and his work on the now-demolished Pearl Bank Apartments.



The advocacy for strata-titled modernist buildings in land-scarce Singapore is fraught with challenges. Pearl Bank Apartments was torn down in 2019 despite calls to conserve the building.

↓ 'Too Young to Die' is a position paper led by Dr Chua Ai Lin for the Singapore Heritage Society to advocate for the conservation of modernist icons. It also inspired the development of an exhibition that ran from 21 August–23 September 2018 at The Substation.

Courtesy of Singapore Heritage Society and Joe Nair





↑ (From left) Heritage consultant Lynn Wong, Dr Chua Ai Lin from the Singapore Heritage Society and Karen Tan from The Projector, with architect of Pearl Bank Apartments Tan Cheng Siong (in white), touring the Pearl Bank Apartments one last time in 2019 before its imminent demolition.

Courtesy of Singapore Heritage Society

↓ The heritage wall at Ah Ma Drink Stall traces the origins and development of the drink stall, as well as aspirations for its future.

Courtesy of Singapore Heritage Society



In October 2021, however, Minister Desmond Lee announced the gazette of Golden Mile Complex as a conserved building, making it the first modernist, strata-titled development to be conserved in Singapore.⁷ For SHS, the news was a major breakthrough in a long journey advocating for the conservation of these post-independence architectural icons.

But much work lies ahead of SHS. While the government, the society and our colleagues in other groups such as the International Council on Monuments and Sites Singapore, or ICOMOS Singapore, have reached a level of consensus on the importance of modernist structures to Singapore's built heritage, more needs to be done in terms of public education as the reactions from the public have been mixed.

Pulau Ubin and Chinatown

Public perceptions of the value of heritage are driven by different factors, including personal memories and societal narratives. Engagement and education also play a part in helping to shape these perceptions. Hence, it is understandable that some Singaporeans see Golden Mile Complex as just another ageing mall and have never made the connection between the modernist structure and Singapore's nation-building story.

But what are communities if not their stories? For the larger society, the greatest risk we see with rapid urban redevelopment is the erosion of bonds and ties that make a community. For this reason, SHS has focused its recent efforts on Pulau Ubin and Chinatown.

While many Singaporeans know Pulau Ubin for its precious nature reserves, few are aware of its cultural heritage. In 2018, SHS worked with the National University of Singapore's Dr Tan Beng Kiang; Philip Lim, an Ubin resident who is part of Sea Angel, a community group that protects nature and preserves the village lifestyle on Ubin; and National Parks Board to rebuild the once-popular Ah Ma Drink Stall that was falling apart. As part of the renovations, a heritage wall was also erected at the stall. The rebuilding of the drinks stall aside, what was perhaps more memorable was understanding the origins and communal bonds of the island's closely knit residents in the process.

Similarly, the Chinatown community has also gone through major changes due to urban renewal in the district. To preserve its history and heritage, SHS initiated projects such as the photographic storytelling project, 'Picturing Chinatown'.⁸ This consisted of a series of workshops that brought together a group of participants to reflect on and share their personal connections and memories of Chinatown over a period of four months. At the conclusion of the project, each person produced a photo essay of everyday life in the area. In many ways, it is memories such as these that define the intangible aspects of heritage. Heritage is as much about personal connections as it is to be part of a larger collective whole.

SHS also collaborated with local theatre company Drama Box on *Chinatown Crossings*, which recounts the story of Kunalan, an Indian man who grew up in a Chinatown shophouse during the 1960s and '70s. Through the production, audiences learn about the dramatic physical changes that have taken place in Chinatown as well as its social practices and memories.

← 'Food Heritage at Home: An Online Panel of Cooks' was organised during the pandemic in May 2020 to engage Singaporeans in conversation about their food heritage.

Courtesy of Singapore Heritage Society

NOTES

- 1 Institute of Policy Studies. 'Study on perceptions of Singapore's Built Heritage and Landmarks'. Retrieved 10 March 2023 from <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/research/ips-social-lab/study-on-perceptions-of-singapore-s-built-heritage-and-landmarks>.
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The Heritage of Food

Food heritage has become an increasingly significant subject in Singapore over the last few years, bolstered by the inscription of the nation's hawker culture on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020. But even as we celebrate this feat, it is crucial to understand how hawking practices have evolved alongside changes in Singapore's built environment, and how our memories and stories we associate with hawker fare have been transmitted across generations.

These gaps in our understanding led SHS to support Dr Vivienne Wee and Sarah Huang Benjamin's project *The Evolution of Singapore's Hawker Culture: Street Food and Changing Landscapes*, a recipient of NHB's Heritage Research Grant in 2019. This perhaps came at an opportune time as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on Singapore and the rest of the world the following year. The forced isolation led many Singaporeans to cook at home, which in turn encouraged them to learn more about the heritage of their food. SHS's Zoom session in May 2020 entitled 'Food Heritage at Home: An Online Panel of Cooks' attracted hundreds of viewers, bearing witness to

how food heritage is very much part of the Singaporean identity.

To conclude, I leave you with a quote by my colleague Dr Chua Ai Lin:

[T]he recipe for heritage advocacy is the same for all of civil society: having the heart to love, the idealism to imagine a better future, and I would add, the grit to keep going despite years of setbacks and disappointments.⁹

These projects have shown us that the most important work that SHS does in preserving Singapore's heritage is largely affective: it is about bringing people together, reviving memories and rekindling their emotions. SHS will continue to bridge knowledge, raise awareness, work with stakeholders and engage communities in both understanding and appreciating Singapore's heritage. For it is only by doing so that Singaporeans understand who they are, and their special place in the world. 🍵



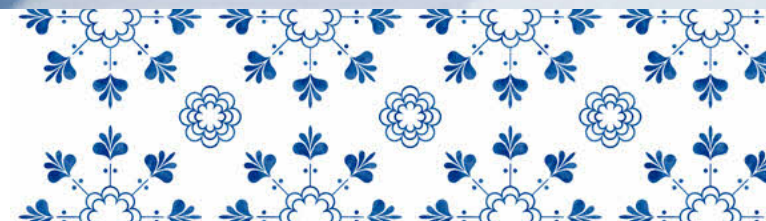
From the Depths of the Seas

Excavating Clues to Singapore's Early History

Two shipwrecks discovered in Singapore waters have yielded a precious hoard of artefacts that provide new evidence of the island's place in ancient maritime networks.

—
Young Wei Ping, Independent Researcher
Conan Cheong, Curator, Asian Civilisations Museum

➤ The excavation of Yuan-era blue-and-white porcelain from the Temasek Wreck is remarkable for being the largest haul of such porcelain in any shipwreck worldwide.



Among the displays in Singapore's museums lie artefacts that speak quietly of the depth of the nation's archaeological heritage. These objects tell the story of Singapore's early history, which goes as far back as the 13th century when it was a port engaged in regional and international trade. While Fort Canning and other terrestrial, or land, sites frequently feature in discussions of Singapore's archaeological heritage, there has been little representation of its maritime archaeological discoveries.

The seas around Southeast Asia have in fact been the site of several historically significant shipwreck discoveries since the 1970s. These date from as recent as the Second World War to the precolonial period, such as the Tang Shipwreck that sank in the 9th century—and was found in 1998 in the waters off Belitung Island in the Java Sea, some 600 kilometres southeast of Singapore. A selection of artefacts from the Tang Shipwreck Collection are currently on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM).

Closer to home, the waters around the island have in recent years yielded precious maritime archaeological material. Two outstanding historical shipwrecks discovered within Singapore's waters are the mid-14th-century Temasek Wreck¹ in 2015, followed by the 1796 *Shah Muncher* in 2019.

Underwater surveys and excavations of these shipwrecks conducted between 2016 and 2021 yielded approximately 10 tonnes of artefacts: four tonnes from the Temasek Wreck, and six tonnes from the *Shah Muncher*. The excavated materials range from Yuan-dynasty (1279–1368) porcelain and numerous ceramic cups, bowls and jars, to metal betel nut cutters and accessories.

One of the most extraordinary discoveries was the variety and quantity of Yuan blue-and-white porcelain found in the Temasek Wreck. Eminent archaeologist John Miksic wrote about the rarity of this find among shipwrecks in his 2013 publication:²



Blue and white porcelain was first produced in large quantities in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, in the early fourteenth century. It was considered vulgar at that time, and only became popular among the Chinese elite in the early fifteenth century.

No shipments of blue and white ware have yet been discovered on Yuan shipwrecks. This presents something of a mystery but suggests that not much blue and white ware was being produced.

The findings from these shipwrecks have upturned long-held notions and yielded new perspectives of Singapore's material culture. Similar artefacts, including Longquan greenware dishes, have been found in both the Temasek Wreck and in terrestrial archaeological sites such as Fort Canning and Empress Place along the Singapore River, with material dating to the 14th century. A comparative study of these discoveries from both land and sea contributes to a deeper understanding of Singapore's maritime connections in the precolonial period.

↑ Longquan greenware retrieved from the Temasek Wreck.

Supported by the National Heritage Board (NHB), ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and ACM, work has been going on behind the scenes to clean, document and study the artefacts in detail. Volunteers led by principal investigator Dr Michael Flecker have slowly chipped away at the large assemblage of artefacts to understand the two shipwrecks and their place in Singapore's history.

Processing Artefacts

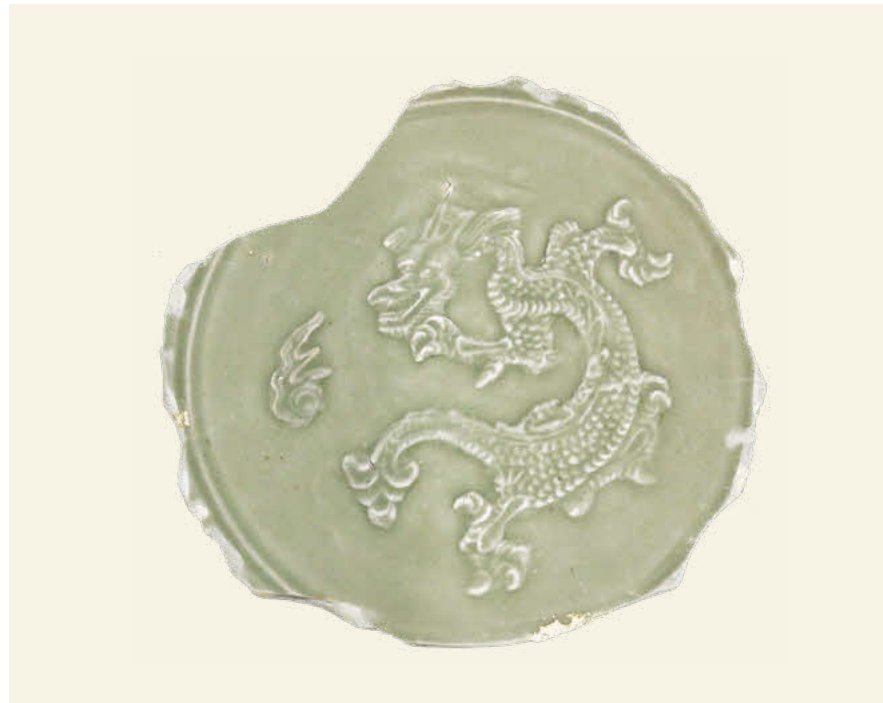
After being submerged for centuries, the artefacts retrieved from the two shipwrecks have naturally seen better days. Eroded, coral-encrusted and broken into pieces, the ocean's elements had not been kind to the remains of the shipwreck. The salvaged artefacts had to undergo intensive conservation treatments in order to neutralise the damage they suffered.

First, the artefacts were treated to stabilise them outside the saline marine environment they were submerged in for centuries, before being washed lightly to clean off any surface residue. The latter was especially rewarding for the team as the process revealed the delicate decorative motifs and glazes of the artefacts—the sense of discovery was thrilling.

After this, a dedicated team of volunteers sorted and documented the artefacts into different categories. For the Temasek Wreck, in particular, this detailed sorting process went beyond the broad typologies of greenware, whiteware, stoneware and blue-and-white to determine the variety of the artefacts. Ceramics were carefully examined and then sorted based on their specific glazes, the quality of the clay, their shape and design, and the kilns they might be associated with.

↗ Volunteers washing and sorting the artefacts.





TOP
A dragon with a flaming pearl moulded in the centre of a large Longquan dish.

ABOVE
Fragment of a Qingbai whiteware from the Temasek Wreck.

Besides the unprecedentedly large presence of Yuan-dynasty blue-and-white porcelain, there were also numerous Longquan greenwares, white Qingbai bowls and dishes, small-mouth jars and coarse stoneware, among other finds.

Under the team's scrutiny, specific artefacts of interest were observed among the fragmentary remains. These include clues hinting at the interconnections of Southeast Asia's maritime activity as well as a variety of ornate decorative motifs: a friendly-looking dragon moulded in

the centre of a dish, a ceramic sherd with a Chinese stamp and another with an Arabic stamp featuring decorative flowers on the rim. Some vessels also had abstract waves and motifs carved onto the ceramic surface, among many other finds. These pieces provide a mere glimpse into the rich variety of the ship's cargo.

The team collects basic data such as the quantity and weight of the artefacts before photographing and packing them for longer-term storage. This data, along with visual documentation and detailed observations of the artefacts, are then consolidated into databases, providing an overview of the shipwreck assemblage for researchers and museum practitioners. This documentation work is ongoing.

Maritime Archaeology as a Platform for Engagement

There has been much discussion of Singapore's role in historical Southeast Asian maritime networks. However, as this study is often centred on textual historical sources, the wealth of insights that could be drawn from maritime archaeological material remains mostly untapped.

Increasingly, though, maritime archaeological findings have found their way into museums, such as the Tang Shipwreck display at ACM. More recently, selected highlights from the Temasek Wreck and the *Shah Muncher* have been put on display in ACM's Singapore Archaeology Gallery (see page 36).

One of the focus areas of NHB's Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 (see page 4 for details) is the conservation of Singapore's maritime heritage. As part of this plan, there will be greater funding and support for the research and safeguarding of maritime archaeological material. The latter often requires unique interventions to stabilise and store the artefacts following their extraction from marine environments.

Needless to say, maritime archaeology is a massive undertaking, an effort



only made possible with help rendered by passionate volunteers. In both the Temasek Wreck and the *Shah Muncher* shipwreck excavations, volunteers helped catalogue the excavated artefacts, contributing significantly to the recording of Singapore's maritime heritage and material culture. These volunteers, who are members of the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society and Friends of the Museum, all share a common interest in documenting Singapore's cultural heritage.

Most people would only ever encounter these artefacts from a distance, through the barrier of a display case in a museum gallery. Being able to directly handle artefacts, many of them centuries-old, is a rare privilege. Holding these archaeological ceramics in one's hands allows for more intimate observations: the indentation of fingerprints from potters centuries ago, the asymmetry of mistakes introduced when crafting each piece, and the imperfectly executed stamps on the surface of a ceramic piece. Through these 'flaws', we glean traces of the human touch that have led to the creation of these wares—bridging a connection to those in the past, if you will.



TOP
Volunteers Michelle Hertz (left) and Martha Lauer washing and sorting artefacts while keeping a keen eye out for interesting features.

ABOVE
A non-functional lug handle of what was once a stoneware jar, likely accidentally crushed before firing in the kiln.

Maritime Artefacts at the Asian Civilisations Museum

As a first step towards making the precious discoveries from the Temasek Wreck and the *Shah Muncher* accessible to the public, ACM unveiled a selection of artefacts from these shipwrecks in its Singapore Archaeology Gallery in January 2022.

In conjunction with this new display, one of the showcases in the main Maritime Trade Gallery is dedicated to ceramics from the cargoes of six other shipwrecks. These are the *Hatcher Cargo*, and wrecks of the *Vung Tau*, the *Götheborg*, the *Geldermalsen*, the *Diana* and the *Tek Sing*. The *Diana* was, like the *Shah Muncher*, a country ship that was wrecked in 1817. Both the *Diana* and the *Geldermalsen*



↑ View of the Singapore Archaeology Gallery, with a display of highlights from the Temasek Wreck.

→ View of the Singapore Archaeology Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum.



carried blue-and-white porcelain of a very similar design to those found in the *Shah Muncher*, reflecting European tastes in tableware at the time.

The final shipwreck in ACM's collection, the 9th-century Tang Shipwreck, resides in a permanent space, the Khoo Teck Puat Gallery. Originally bound for Iran and Iraq, the Arab dhow met its unfortunate end near the island of Belitung, off the coast of Sumatra in Indonesia. It had been loaded with precious cargo from China, such as gold and silver as well as ceramics from the Xing, Ding, Yue, Changsha and Guangdong kilns.

The layout of ACM's galleries has been designed such that visitors can see how the Temasek Wreck and the *Shah Muncher* fit into the larger story of maritime trade and international commerce in Asia. The Maritime Trade galleries on the first floor, which include the Singapore Archaeology Gallery and the Tang Shipwreck Gallery, reveal the history of Asian port cities and globalisation through displays of Asian export art.



➤ The only intact Yuan-dynasty blue-and-white vessel found in the Temasek Wreck. The image above shows it lying on the ocean floor, encrusted with sediment and coral.

Highlights from the Temasek Wreck

The most outstanding artefact in the Temasek Wreck display is likely the only intact blue-and-white vessel that was salvaged. The shape of this vessel is unique among Yuan blue-and-white porcelains. The flange around a tall neck suggests it might have been used as a hookah (water pipe) base. The darker spots of inky blue-black cobalt pigment in certain areas of the decoration, known as the 'heaped and piled' style, date it to the 14th century.

When the vessel was first uncovered by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute archaeologist Michael Ng, it looked like a discarded

object—such was its state, its delicate design obscured by encrustations of sediment and coral. A small screen next to the vessel in the gallery plays a video capturing the moment of discovery and its subsequent careful retrieval from the ocean bed. Blue-and-white porcelain, like this one, made in the Jingdezhen kilns in Jiangxi Province, may be considered as the first global 'brand' of luxury goods that were exported from its production base. These wares were in high demand across Asia and the Middle East—and, it seems, in Singapore as well.

Also on display in the gallery are exquisite fragments excavated from the shipwreck site. These span a large variety of ceramic forms: bowls, stem cups, jars and other types of vessels. It is believed that the port of call of the sunken ship was Temasek (as Singapore was known then). One piece of evidence that points to this is the iconography of a mandarin duck in a lotus pond—the signature motif of Yuan dynasty's Wenzong Emperor (r. 1328–32)—in blue-and-white porcelains excavated from both the Temasek Wreck and from Temasek-period land sites in Singapore.

Besides blue-and-white porcelain, the Temasek Wreck also yielded large quantities of Longquan ceramics, many of them intact. Famed for their thick, wax-like green glazes ranging from seafoam and jade-green hues to shades of olive, Longquan ceramics were exported in large quantities all over Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea and the Islamic world from the 10th to mid-15th centuries. One fine example on display is a barbed-rim dish incised with a rare design of twin phoenixes in the centre.

Another noteworthy artefact in the gallery is an inkstone, one of the few non-ceramic items recovered from the Temasek Wreck. Inkstones were used for grinding solid inksticks with water to make liquid ink. The lack of ornamentation and the rough chisel marks on the underside suggest that this inkstone served a purely utilitarian purpose.



Currently on display in the Singapore Archaeology Gallery, this large green-glazed ceramic plate was made in the Longquan kiln in Zhejiang Province. It was one of the significant archaeological finds from the Singapore River site at Empress Place, near the Asian Civilisations Museum. Teams from the National University of Singapore and ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute had carried out excavations on the banks of the Singapore River in 1998 and 2015 respectively.

Featured alongside other finds from the 2015 excavation, the plate is strategically sited right in front of a window overlooking the original riverside excavation site, which is now lined with a row of shady rain trees. Artefacts from the Temasek Wreck are placed next to those from Empress Place and Fort Canning to encourage visitors to see the connections between Temasek-era archaeological sites that span land and sea.

Excavations along the Singapore River, including Empress Place, yielded various Chinese ceramics—celadons, blue-and-white wares and white vessels from Dehua—amongst other finds. These would have been traded for products such as wood and cotton from the Malay Peninsula and the Riau Islands. The abundance of these goods is evidence of the lively commercial centre that was 14th-century Temasek.

↑ A large green-glazed ceramic plate made in the Longquan kiln in Zhejiang Province, China, excavated from the 2015 archaeological dig in Empress Place, where the Asian Civilisations Museum is currently located.

Highlights from the *Shah Muncher* Wreck

The second shipwreck, the *Shah Muncher*, was identified as a country ship—a category of merchant vessels built in India to ply the China–India trade, operating under licence from the East India Company. This deduction was based on parts of the *Shah Muncher*'s hull structure as well as the surviving ship's gear, such as its rigging, anchors and iron cannons.

The *Shah Muncher* traded Indian cotton for sugar, zinc and porcelain from China. It was built in 1789 for Sorabjee Muncherjee (1755–1805), a prominent Parsi merchant in the Bombay export trade. Although the vessel sank in 1796—some 23 years before Raffles established a British trading post in Singapore—its cargo gives us an idea of the kind of goods that might have been purchased and subsequently transshipped in the region.

Aside from a large ceramic cargo, archaeologists found tutenague (zinc ingots), glass case bottles (designed for easy packing into wooden cases or crates),



↑ A mother-of-pearl seal inscribed with Armenian script recovered from the *Shah Muncher* shipwreck, attesting to the presence of Armenian merchants on board the ship.

← An assortment of artefacts found in the *Shah Muncher* wreck. Clockwise from top-left: agate medallions, a copper alloy bracelet and a betel nut cutter.



glass wine bottles, copper alloy bracelets as well as thousands of agate medallions and glass beads. The gallery exhibits a representative selection of this broad range of cargo.

The *Shah Muncher* also yielded other fascinating objects that provide insights into some of the people who were on board the ship—for instance, Armenian merchants. Their presence on the final voyage of the *Shah Muncher* is suggested by the personal effects found, such as three mother-of-pearl seals and a small gold tag, all inscribed with Armenian script. Armenian merchants, who had established extensive trading networks in Asia and Europe since the 17th century, both competed and cooperated with British East India Company agents in the pursuit of profit.

To enhance the visitor experience, the gallery features an immersive video depicting the experience of maritime archaeologists in the course of their work. Viewers get a chance to see them dive among fish, coral and churning sand to salvage precious artefacts in the challenging yet beautifully surreal environment.

The video is accompanied by a soundscape composed of recordings made during the excavation. Titled 'Senescence', which means biological ageing, the aural work interprets a shipwreck as one large, dying organism—suggesting that even as the ship loses its function as a vessel to move humans across the seas, it becomes a harbour for new life.

The artefactual representation of the historical individual via archaeological assemblages humanises the past. Maritime archaeological sites are akin to time capsules: beyond the excavated cargo, the ship's crew are also represented by their possessions at the time of wrecking.

The imaginative appeal of maritime archaeology can in a sense embody larger-than-life historical narratives, making it an invaluable resource for heritage outreach and education. With the spotlight increasingly trained on Singapore's rich maritime heritage, the public can expect to see more of its sunken treasures being showcased, even as the story of Singapore's early history continues to unfold with ongoing archaeological projects in the waters around Singapore and Southeast Asia. ♦

— All images courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum

The authors would like to thank Dr Michael Flecker, Visiting Senior Fellow with ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, for his help in reviewing this article.

NOTES

- 1 It has been referred to as the Temasek Wreck due to the likelihood that the ship's journey included 14th-century Temasek (present-day Singapore).
- 2 John N. Miksic, *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 293.

High Leaps and Clashing Cymbals

Qilin Dance in Contemporary Singapore

A mythical creature from ancient Chinese mythology that found expression through a ritual dance in Hakka culture struggles to find its place in the modern city-state.

Angela Sim, Heritage Researcher



Performers of the traditional Hakka *qilin* dance demonstrating the Sitting Horse (四平马; *si ping ma*) stance.
Courtesy of Edmund Lau, Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore

According to popular lore, the birth of Confucius (551–479 BCE), one of China's greatest sages, was foretold by an omen that took the form of a mythical horned creature. This hooved beast is believed to have appeared to the mother of Confucius and prophesied the greatness of the child who was to be born.

In his adulthood, Confucius himself chanced upon the same creature when it was captured in a royal hunt. After the encounter, the sage predicted the end of his life; true to his word, he passed away three years later. What is the story behind this sacred chimera that foretold the birth and passing of this famed sage and is today revered by the Chinese as an auspicious symbol?

This beast is the *qilin* (麒麟), one of the four divine creatures in Chinese mythology alongside the turtle, phoenix and dragon. Legend has it that the *qilin* made its first appearance in the courtyard of the deity Huangdi (Yellow Emperor) in 2697 BCE.¹

Myriad Versions of the 'Chinese Unicorn'

Like many mythological beasts, there is not one single, absolute description of the *qilin*. It has been depicted in diverse ways, depending on the source.² The scholar, Jing Fang (77–37 BCE), described the *qilin* as approximately two metres tall and having five colours, including a yellow underbelly.³ Another contemporary, Liu Xiang (77–6 BCE), wrote in his book *Shuoyuan* (說苑) that the *qilin* does not live in herds, does not travel, never falls into snares, is aware of its surroundings and seeks solace on flat ground. The *qilin* is said to be restrained, humble and unobtrusive.⁴

More than a millennium later, the Neo-Confucianist scholar, Zhu Xi (1130–1200), described the creature as possessing the tail of an ox and the body and hooves of a deer. Apparently, when it walks, it glides over grass, careful not to trample on any insects in its path.⁵

The depiction of the *qilin* as a unicorn only began in the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). In the Ming era (1368–1644), it had been portrayed with scales covering its deer-like body.⁶ Though sometimes referred to in English sources as a 'Chinese unicorn', the *qilin* may be depicted with one, two or more horns. Contemporary depictions of the *qilin* usually feature it with one curved horn at the top of its head and two or more smaller horns down its back.



A *tok wi* (altar cloth) is a length of fabric that is draped over a Chinese ancestral altar. Sacred creatures such as the *qilin* (pictured in the centre) are usually depicted in elaborate embroidery. Courtesy of Yuhan Embroidery Studio 裕涵繡莊

Qilin: Here, There and Everywhere

In Ming-dynasty China (1368–1644), nobility and the emperor's sons-in-law wore badges depicting revered, mythical creatures such as the *qilin*. These badges were also awarded to those who had proven themselves with meritorious or special service. During the reign of Qing Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722), the *qilin* became the emblem of first-rank military officers.⁸ Each mythical animal of the military rank insignia is said to symbolise the degree of the wearer's courage.⁹

Besides China, the *qilin* is also mentioned in ancient Korean legends. King Chumo,¹⁰ the founding monarch of the kingdom of Goguryeo (37 BCE–668 CE; comprising today's North Korea, northeastern China as well as parts of South Korea and Russia), has been described as riding the *qilin* during his reign.¹¹ More recently in 2012, North Korea claimed that it had discovered the cave—Kiringul (Kirin's Grotto)—that was the supposed lair of the *qilin* that King Chumo rode.¹²

Closer to home, the *qilin* can be seen on the *tok wi*, a piece of embroidered fabric that is draped over an ancestral altar in Hokkien and Chinese Peranakan homes. Sacred auspicious animals like the *qilin* are common imagery depicted on the *tok wi*. The fabric consists of two main sections: an upper panel and a longer lower panel. The former represents life after death while the latter symbolises life in the physical world.¹³

Interestingly, the mythical *qilin* also appears in contemporary popular culture. In the 2022 fantasy film *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore*, a *qilin* assumes the role of leader among wizards. Director David Yates explained the presence of the *qilin* in his film: "In the wizarding world of the past, the *qilin* was called upon in elections: all the candidates would line up, and the *qilin* would approach each candidate, and if it bowed to one, that would influence the people's choice."¹⁴

Finally, perhaps one of the most widely seen yet also easily missed *qilin* iconography is found on the logo of the Japanese beer brand, Kirin—the Japanese word for *qilin*. In Japanese culture, the *qilin* is known for its ability to bring about happiness, peace and tranquility.¹⁵

Possessing the head of a dragon, the tail of a Buddhist guardian lion and four goat-like hooves, the *qilin* exudes a menacing aura and a commanding presence. Yet, despite its aggressive demeanour, there is a gentleness to the creature. The *qilin* is also believed to be an excellent judge of character, being associated with righteousness, benevolence and virtue.⁷



↑ Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore is among the country's foremost *qilin* dance troupes, 2022.

Courtesy of Edmund Lau, Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore

Hakka Qilin Dance in Singapore

In Singapore, the most significant representation of the *qilin* can be found in the form of the Hakka *qilin* dance.¹⁶ Accompanied by Chinese percussion instruments, this traditional dance is similar in form to the more common Chinese lion dance, but here the *qilin* is the star of the show.

The *qilin* dance is believed to have its roots in the Qianlong period (1735–96) of the Qing dynasty. Historically, the Hakka people were a nomadic tribe in China who subsisted mainly on farming.¹⁶ The dance originated as a ritual to cleanse areas where the farmers dwelled and to drive away any evil entities that lurked in the vicinity.

The dance was also performed to invoke clement weather for a good harvest, or to celebrate a bountiful harvest. The Chinese idiom, '国泰民安, 风调雨顺' (peaceful country and favourable weather), is often sewn onto the body of the *qilin* prop or painted onto the bottom of its head frame.¹⁷ It is not uncommon to see Chinese lion dance troupes performing during auspicious occasions such as the Lunar New Year or when seeking

good fortune for one's new business or home in Singapore. However, what is little known is that the *qilin* ranks above the lion. When a lion or dragon dance troupe encounters a *qilin* troupe during a performance, the dancers will bow as low as possible as a mark of deference and respect to the *qilin*.¹⁸

The *qilin* dance used to be de rigueur at Hakka celebrations such as weddings, births, the first-month celebration of a newborn and religious festivals. Today, however, there are very few troupes in Singapore that faithfully and accurately perform this dance due to waning interest as well as the demanding skills required. One such troupe that continues to breathe life into this age-old tradition is Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore (恩隍文化团新加坡), founded in March 2015 by Eugene Wan, who also heads and coaches the troupe.

↓ The *qilin* in flight pose during a performance, 2022.

Courtesy of Edmund Lau, Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore



A Childhood Dream

Eugene Wan's foray into the *qilin* dance form began as a childhood dream. In 1984, a four-year-old Wan was entranced by a *qilin* dance performance televised during a Lunar New Year programme from Hong Kong. Some 15 years later in 1999, Wan embarked on his dance journey with a troupe after commissioning the making of a *qilin* head.

With a deep desire to learn the finer techniques of this intriguing dance, Wan set out on a mission to find a *shifu* (master). But this was no easy task: few people in Singapore were skilled in the art form.

Wan's quest eventually took him to Hong Kong, and in 2015 he met Master Yeung Chun Mo (楊振武; Yang Zhen Wu), the martial arts director of Tsuen Wan North Praying Mantis Gymnasium. Master Yeung specialises in the kung fu style known as Northern Praying Mantis (北螳螂; *bei tanglang*). He also created his own *qilin* dance style—the Yang Zhen Wu style—which is known for its exceptionally low stances and fast, powerful movements. Two years after their first encounter, Master Yeung officially took Wan under his wing as a disciple, with Wan becoming the first Singaporean to perform the Yang Zhen Wu *qilin* dance style.

Master Yeung believes that the *qilin* is an ascetic that does not kill or hurt living creatures, and is peaceable even while it eliminates evil and harm. Unlike the lion which may come across a snake or a centipede during the dance sequence, the *qilin* confronts only inanimate objects. While the lion would groom or lick its hooves after a 'kill', the *qilin* does not do that. In the Yang Zhen Wu dance style, the tail of the *qilin* is not maneuvered by the dancer with a string, which is what happens in the lion dance.¹⁹

Dancing to the Percussion Beat

In the *qilin* dance, movements are accompanied by a percussion ensemble made up of traditional Hakka instruments: a gong (高边锣; *gao bian luo*), a pair of large cymbals (广钹; *guang bo*) and a small drum (小战鼓; *xiao zhan gu*). Together, they create a powerful and hypnotic rhythm. But the heart and soul of the *qilin* dance are the sound of clashing cymbals, unlike the lion dance which is driven mainly by drums. These cymbals measure 45 centimetres in diameter, much larger than the 30-centimetre cymbals used in the lion dance.

Sometimes, a special drum known as the *shi gong gu* (师公鼓; literally 'master's drum') is used during the performance. This drum is believed to contain the energy and essence of all the past *shifu* (masters). Given its importance, the *shi gong gu* can only be played by a *shifu* or someone of an equivalent standing. It is



↑ Eugene Wan (right), founder of Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore, with Master Yeung Chun Mo, who taught him the *qilin* dance form, 2017.

Courtesy of Eugene Wan, Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore



↑ Eugene Wan (pictured paying respects), the founder and coach of Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore, at a performance on Kusu Island, 2022.

Courtesy of Edmund Lau, Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore

→ A full set of percussion instruments used in a *qilin* dance. From left: a gong (高边锣; *gao bian luo*), a small drum (小战鼓; *xiao zhan gu*), a pair of large cymbals (广钹; *guang bo*) and the master's drum (师公鼓; *shi gong gu*).

Courtesy of Edmund Lau, Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore



a tough instrument to master, and a high level of skill is required to achieve the precise tone when the drum is struck.

Each *qilin* performance kicks off with five drumbeats from the *shi gong gu*. This signifies a mark of respect to elders and an invitation for the late masters to bless the performance. Yan Wong Cultural Troupe's *shi gong gu* features a talisman that represents the deity *qilin tongzi* (麒麟童子), who is the protector of the troupe.

Strength and Grace: Qilin Dance Moves

A *qilin* performance comprises two dancers: one at the front controlling the head and one behind as the torso. Appearing almost ceaseless and unrelenting in their moves, *qilin* dancers,

driven by the propulsive percussion, leap high into the air, kicking their hooves. The elaborate dance is characterised by sudden bursts of movement and surges of energy. Known for being expressive, the *qilin*'s gestures connote surprise, wakefulness, strength, attack and suspicion by turns.

Qilin dancers adopt low stances unlike the lion dance, which is marked by more feline movements. The ability of the troupe is measured by how low a stance the sinewy performers can achieve during the performance. Dancers are trained in endurance and depend very much on the strength of their thigh muscles. Another unique characteristic of the dance is the powerful head movements—the left-to-right motion of the *qilin* head represents respect to elders.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

The Bowing Horse (弓字马; *gong zi ma*).

The Cat Stance (吊马; *diao ma*).

The Qilin Step (麒麟步; *qilin bu*).

Courtesy of Edmund Lau, Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore



The most basic stance in the *qilin* dance is the Sitting Horse (四平马; *si ping ma*; see pages 40–41). The weight of the dancer is centred and evenly distributed, imparting strength and sturdiness as well as stability with each step. The dancer at the front uses both hands to grip the *qilin*'s head tightly; his elbows, wrists and fingers must be strong and flexible in order to create dynamic movements. The dancer's elbows are kept within range of the *qilin*'s head and usually not exposed. Barring certain movements, the head of the *qilin* cannot be lowered or allowed to fall, and its back must always be parallel to the ground.

Another common stance is the Bowing Horse (弓字马; *gong zi ma*), a kung fu stance used for low attack or evasion. In this movement, the *qilin*'s left hooves remain flat on the ground, with both right legs extended, and the dancers' bodies are turned towards the left to face the front. The trunks of their bodies must be stable, aligned with the centre of gravity. The weight distribution should be 70 percent on the front foot and 30 percent on the rear.

Also noteworthy is the Cat or Tiger Stance (吊马; *diao ma*). Here, the dancer's front leg is lifted, with the rear leg bearing the weight and his body like a coiled spring. The final stance is the Qilin Step (麒麟步; *qilin bu*)—a gait that represents both offence and defence. In this stance, each dancer's legs are crossed one over the other. The key to this stance is the coordination of hands and feet as well as a stable gait.

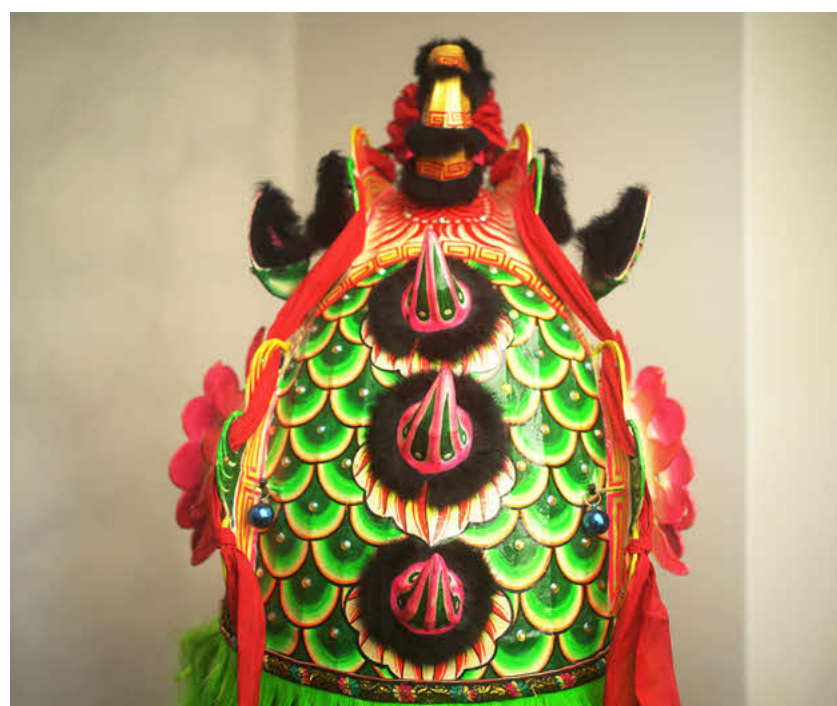
The Art of Making the *Qilin* Prop

The *qilin* prop used in the dance is made by a dwindling handful of artisans. The head frame is crafted from bamboo, instead of rattan, for its pliability and strength. As the head frame requires great stability, the bamboo has to be carefully selected. It gives the *qilin* head its signature asymmetrical shape, while its weight also directly affects the dancers' movements.

The skill of the craftsmen is reflected in the intricate structure of the head frame, which is constructed with numerous bamboo pieces bound together with strips of paper. When the skeleton is complete, layers of paper are glued on using a homemade paste, while ensuring that all the curved parts such as the horns are smooth and even.

When the structure is dry, a white basecoat is painted over before the patterns are drawn in bright colours. Commonly seen auspicious designs include the bamboo, chrysanthemum, plum blossoms and the bottle gourd, which are associated with the *qilin*'s benevolent character. Other embellishments such as bells, pom poms and rabbit fur are also incorporated at this stage.

Arguably, the most beguiling feature of the *qilin*'s head is its eyes. Traditionally, these were made from hollowed-out duck eggshells, but due to their fragility, table tennis balls are now used instead. Sometimes, light bulbs that can be lit up are used in place of table tennis balls.²⁰



➔ A craftsman demonstrating how the *qilin* head is crafted from bamboo, 2021.

Courtesy of 古洞雷卓祺金龍麒麟醒獅扎作 Kenneth Mo

➔ The back of a *qilin*'s head with scales and a row of smaller horns, in addition to the large horn at the top of the head.

Courtesy of Angela Sim

Other noteworthy features include intricately painted fish scales at the back of the head and on the body, comprising five colours that represent the five directions: north, south, east, west and centre. These are also known as the five celestial marshal camps that ward off plagues, misfortune and demons.

The Future of *Qilin* Dance in Singapore

Qilin dance was once a hallmark of Hakka culture in Singapore. If not for the few surviving *qilin* dance troupes in the city-state, this aspect of Hakka culture would have faded into obscurity long ago. The decline of *qilin* dance can be attributed to diminishing awareness and interest among the Hakka community, especially the younger generations. For older Hakka people, the dance symbolises the embodiment of the spiritual and the ritual. It is a performance that is said to counter evil, purify, renew and bring blessings to the community.

In spite of the waning interest in *qilin* dance, it is heartening to know that Yan Wong Cultural Troupe Singapore has recently been receiving members as young as nine years old. There is hope yet that the legend and the *qilin* dance form can continue to be kept alive in the years to come. 🍀

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Early 20th-century Postcards

Power Play and the Subjugation of Women

Picture postcards were once heralded as embodying the spirit of modernity. But peer more closely at the images they portray and you will see colonial structures of dominance.

Assoc Prof Maznah Mohamad,
Department of Malay Studies, National
University of Singapore; Kathy Rowland,
Co-founder and Managing Editor, ArtsEquator



Fig. 1
Postcard labelled "Soendaneesche" (Dutch for 'Sunda Girl'), circa 1920.
Courtesy of ArtsEquator

An editorial by James Douglas published in the *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser* in 1907 declared the dawn of that century as “the age of postcards”. The picture postcard was described as “the flower and crown of the modern spirit”.¹ Although largely satirical in tone, the writer was not far off the mark in his description: by the early 20th century, postcards were so widely produced and used that one could conclude that they had truly taken the world by storm.

The postcard came into being in the late 19th century thanks to the technology of cameras and films, and the subsequent proliferation of photography studios. Picture postcards first appeared at the Paris Exhibition of 1889; by 1915, these nifty oblong-shaped paper products had become a feature of everyday life.² Between 1894 and 1919, an astounding 140 billion postcards were mailed

globally. In Singapore alone, 250,000 postcards were produced in 1924 by camera-maker Houghton Butcher (Eastern) Ltd whose office was located in Camera House on Robinson Road.

The ubiquity of the postcard also meant that images were easily circulated across the globe, reproducing new social and cultural contexts for their recipients and viewers. Postcards by Houghton Butcher (Eastern) Ltd were featured in the Malaya Pavilion at the 1924 Empire Exhibition in Wembley. Aimed at showcasing the achievements of British colonial governance, the Empire Exhibition displayed artefacts, trade samples and native people from the colonies for public viewing. Postcards became a significant medium for depicting subjects, places, activities and scenes of faraway colonised places that ordinary Europeans could access, albeit vicariously.

Scholars have argued that postcards were employed as objects of imperial dominance.³ These were visual products that had the power to signify, encode and legitimise imperial expansion.⁴ In archives and libraries all over the world, there exist enormous collections of postcards depicting ‘ethnic’ types—a form of colonial classification that excluded Europeans. The immense popularity and wide circulation of these postcards, whether advertently or not, helped define ethnic and racial categories within the mould of coloniser and the colonised.

A Vehicle for Vice

As the postcard grew into a commodity of mass consumption, interestingly, it also became a vehicle for vice and moral offences—particularly, obscenity. While picture postcards of idyllic beaches, exotic landscapes and vernacular architecture sold well enough, the ones that proved more lucrative were of women in sexualised or nude poses. By the 1900s, there were reports in Singapore of sellers and private distributors of postcards who had been charged with possessing obscene materials in the form of picture postcards.

In 1927, the Johor police seized a collection of postcards, “mostly of naked women”, which two men had attempted to sneak into Johor from Singapore. In his statement, the judge wrote that “Malays were very susceptible in these matters”, and gravely disapproved of “the exhibition of the female form in a naked state”.⁵

But the law was not so clear: some of these postcards were in fact permissible. Two decades earlier in 1907, a man was prosecuted for possessing such postcards. The prosecutor said that the accused was found to be selling “pictures of unlovely foreign women with nothing particular on, and the defence did not contend they were *scientific* [emphasis added]”.⁶ Thus, under the guise of ‘science’, one could print and reproduce photos of locals even if they were nudes—as long as the subjects were not Europeans.

Unsurprisingly, such was the thinking at the zenith of the British Empire: the pseudo-ethnographic style of images of colonised peoples, including the “unusual, taboo, and erotic”, was deemed to serve a scientific function—that is, the construction of a colonial storehouse of knowledge about native subjects. Photographs in library collections were often captioned with the phrase “on behalf of science” to legitimise their circulation and consumption.⁷



Fig. 2
Postcard with an assembly of snapshots captioned “Malay beauties” and “Tamil”, circa 1902. The first three photos depict the same woman in different poses, while the fourth is of a Sikh Punjabi man, erroneously identified as a “Tamil”.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore

Alternative Ways of Seeing

Postcards were a form of colonial-driven transmission of ideas and consciousness, and their popularity coincided with the peak of European colonial domination from the late 19th century to the early decades of the 20th century. Thus, the study of postcards is very much a study of power and agency. Agency in this context refers to an individual’s capacity to act according to their will in a given situation. The images printed on postcards can also be seen as an extension of orientalism—an intellectual tradition of the West that involved the study of the peoples and cultures of Asia and the Middle East and which often perpetuated racial stereotypes.

Inaccuracy and misrepresentation were par for the course. For instance, a postcard from Penang dated 1902 features the captions “Malay beauties” and “Tamil” (Fig. 2). However, pictured

on the postcard are in fact the same woman in three different poses, while the “Tamil” man is actually a Sikh Punjabi. Postcards such as this one were not bound by any standards for accuracy and truth; instead, they were often produced for their curiosity value and to satisfy Western desires to consume the ‘exotic’ and ‘strange’ from other lands, in particular, of colonised peoples.

In another typical colonial-era postcard, we see a woman with her arms clasped behind her head, labelled simply as “Malay woman” (Fig. 3). The return address scribbled on the card is in Shanghai, although it is postmarked in Singapore. That such a postcard—bearing a supposedly definitive idea of what constitutes a ‘Malay woman’—had travelled halfway across the globe shows the circulatory power of this medium. This in turn perpetuates the singular, monolithic notion of the ‘Malay woman’.



3



4

Inadvertently, the invention of the camera⁸ and the ability to reproduce images also helped cement the dominance of the male gaze. There were few women photographers back then. In many of these postcards, women in the colonies were portrayed as erotic, uninhibited sexual objects.

In examples of photographed women from West Africa, Morocco, Fiji, Indo-China and Japan, subjects are often captured in poses that are almost entirely alike in terms of their objectification of women and girls as sexualised bodies. The subjects either appear in the nude or partially so, or pose in sexually alluring positions, against backgrounds depicting local objects to represent their distinct racial 'types'. A woman from French Indo-China, for instance, might be pictured holding a fan.

A postcard produced in Singapore featuring a bare-chested woman is captioned "A Malay Woman from Java" (Fig. 4). The woman is classified and typified as belonging to a racial category, with the added identifier of place. Such a label is meant to suggest the 'scientific' basis of photographing natives in the nude—an attempt to legitimise such overtly sexualised representation as an exercise in knowledge-making. The power dynamic between coloniser and the colonised manifests itself starkly



Fig. 3
Postcard titled "Malay Woman", 1908. It has a return address in Shanghai, but was postmarked in Singapore.
Courtesy of Maznah Mohamad



Fig. 4
Postcard depicting a bare-chested woman labelled "A Malay Woman from Java", produced by G.R. Lambert and Co. in Singapore, 1912. The image has been cropped for reasons of propriety.
Courtesy of ArtsEquator

in such photographic images through the authoritative photographer and the compliant photographed subject. Today, as we view these images from a vantage standpoint, from another era and embedded in a different social and political structure, how can we retain or reclaim the agency of the photographic subjects? How can one seek new ways of reading these images so that stereotypical, harmful ideas of women can be questioned and contested, or even inverted? There are two ways we can do this.

The Inverted Gaze

The first approach is to invert the gaze of the photographer to the gaze—or, in some instances, even glare—of the subject. By doing this, we demote the power of the photographer by returning agency to the subject who is staring straight into the camera lens.

In a postcard (Fig. 5) captioned "Malay woman, Singapore", a woman wearing a shawl stares directly into the camera lens without the faintest trace of a smile. In fact, one may interpret her gaze as unfriendly or even angry. We cannot be sure that the subject's pose was composed at the behest of the photographer, but we can at least read her facial expression in ways that reclaim—or misrecognise⁹—the usual impression of a 'Malay', 'Islamic' or 'modest' woman through the sartorial symbols of the veil and *kebaya* (a tunic with long sleeves).



Fig. 5
A woman stares fixedly into the camera, 1903.
Collection of National Museum of Singapore

In Figure 6, a young woman is depicted naked from the waist up while sitting at the edge of a chair—a pose that perhaps denotes some hesitation or nervousness. But we also sense that the woman is looking accusingly at the camera; reading more deeply into the image, one may perhaps even sense the subject's simmering anger at being possibly coerced into posing in this manner.

Figure 7 shows a photograph of a trio of older women. Both the seated women stare intensely into the camera, while the woman standing between them looks sideways. We may deduce the hierarchical social status of the women: the pair seated are in a position of authority and the woman standing is in their service. With their seated poses and arms placed confidently at their sides, the gaze of the two dominant women is fixed, appearing almost defiant.



6



7



Fig. 6

"Malay Woman", late 19th century. The image has been cropped for reasons of propriety. The original image can be viewed at go.gov.sg/musesg162-postcards-6.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore

Fig. 7

Postcard depicting three Malay women, shot at the photography studio of G.R. Lambert and Co. in Singapore, late 19th century.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore



8



9



Fig. 8

A woman dressed in the *berkemban*, an informal style of wearing the sarong, and posing in an alluring manner, undated.

Farish Noor Collection, courtesy of Malaysia Design Archive

Fig. 9

A postcard of a Sundanese woman sitting on a rock, undated. The back of the postcard is captioned "Soendaneesche vrouw" (Dutch for 'Sundanese woman').

Farish Noor Collection, courtesy of Malaysia Design Archive

Dialogical Encounter

The second approach to re-reading images is to use a comparative device. In this method, selected photographs are placed together such that they generate multiple meanings, depending on how they are grouped. From this, we are able to tease out critical dialogues or narratives from these photographic encounters.

When studied side by side, Figures 8 and 9 invite comparison about their enmeshed notions of sensuality and modesty. Both women adopt the same pose: sitting on a rock, with their bodies leaning forward slightly. Perhaps the photographer meant to highlight the sensual character of native women, particularly so in Figure 8 where the subject is dressed in a sarong that reveals her cleavage.

A sarong worn in this manner is known as the *berkemban*, typically only seen in informal settings such as bath times or when cooling off in the surrounds of the home, among family and friends. In this postcard, however, the *berkemban* has been reconstituted to exoticise and sexualise the subject. The staged artificiality of the image is further highlighted by her jewellery—necklace and bangles are used to add beauty and charm to the subject when in reality she would have removed these for practical reasons.

Compare this with the subject in Figure 9 who wears a *kebaya* and thus appears very modest. The use of women's bodies to imprint the sensibility of the times—one captured at the height of colonialism in the early 20th century and

the other at the dawn of postcolonialism in 1950s—is starkly represented in the pairing of these two images.

In Figure 10, we may read strength and authority in the faces and postures of these three older women; it is almost as if they are defying the set poses typically suggested by the photographer. They are standing matter-of-factly without their shoes on, no suggestion of a smile on their faces, and staring straight into the camera. Although they are labelled as “Malay Women”, their facial features suggest they may in fact be Chinese Peranakan.

The trio of younger women in Figure 11, on the other hand, are clad only in sarong and appear to be in artificially staged poses that hint at sensuality. When we place these two images side by side, we can feel the power of the piercing stare of the three older women—most obviously directed at the photographer, but we can also imagine the older set of women looking askance at the younger women.

Together, Figures 12 and 13 make for a pleasing comparison or complementarity. It is likely that these photographs were taken around the same time, circa 1890s: it was fashionable then for Malay women to wear a veil made of a diaphanous material and ever so slightly sweep the hair over the forehead. Through their elegant attire and poses, both women seem to exude an aura of modesty, pride and dignity. When placed side by side, one can almost sense the way they are ‘looking’ at each other, as if silently communicating mutual reassurance.



Fig. 10
Postcard captioned “Malay Women”, depicting three older women who may or may not be Malay, undated.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore



11



Fig. 11
Postcard of three youthful women clad in sarong, early 20th century.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore



Fig. 12
“A Malay Woman”, 1890s.

Gretchen Liu Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Fig. 13
“Malay Girl”, undated.

Farish Noor Collection, courtesy of Malaysia Design Archive



12



13

Being and Becoming: Of Femininities in the Malay World Through 50 Images



14



15



16

As part of the research project entitled 'Being and Becoming Female in the Malay World: Interrogating and Curating the Photo-Archives of Early Singapore' supported by the National Heritage Board, an online exhibition titled *Being and Becoming: Of Femininities in the Malay World Through 50 Images* was held from 12 May–31 August 2022.

Through the curation of 50 iconic images, the exhibition invited audiences to reflect on the themes of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the origins of gender and ethnic classification. It also provided an opportunity for viewers to reflect and contemplate on the images and form their own personal insights. Covering the region of present-day Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, the photographs were sourced from collections of archival images from the mid-1800s to the 1950s.

The interactive website was anchored on three major themes: Body, Space and Activity. The first theme, Body, questioned the power of the camera to frame and capture the subject. Based on the images, viewers were encouraged to reflect on the body as a site of social construction and inscription. By observing the subjects' phenotype, skin colour, posture, expression, dress (or lack of), ornaments, accessories and compositional frames, audiences were led to read and question each representation.

The theme on Space examined how choices of interior/domestic, architectural and urban settings frame bodies and identities in the photographs. Besides acting as a backdrop, space has the ability to project the image's intended narrative within which the subject is meant to be understood.

Activity, the final theme, featured photographs of women working in and outside the household. The work performed by women then, as it is today, played a significant role in generating income for the household.

There were three interactive segments in the exhibition comprising multiple-choice, compare and contrast, and open-ended questions. By aggregating the responses received, researchers gained some understanding of certain perceptions of femininity—stereotypes, for example—that have persisted to this day.

For instance, in one compare and contrast question, viewers were asked to comment on two photographs of women (Fig. 15) dressed in Burmese attire and holding what appears to

be a cheroot (a type of cigar) between their fingers. Most viewers found the images to be "jarring". From this, we can surmise that many viewers were discomfited by the image of a traditional Asian woman in native dress engaging in an action that is usually associated with maleness—smoking. But it was in fact quite common for women in some societies to smoke in those days.

In another example featuring two photographs, each depicting a trio of women, respondents were asked which image better represented the "essence of Malay femininity" (Fig. 16). Viewers gravitated towards the photograph of the three lithe, bare-shouldered and sarong-clad young women whose poses (and faces) were averted from the gaze of the camera. The clear-cut popularity of this image when compared to the other—depicting three older women in full *kebaya* and *baju kurung* (a knee-length blouse worn over a skirt), all staring straight into the camera—implies that femininity today is still associated with youthful beauty, a slender body shape and a coy demeanour.

By engaging the public during the virtual exhibition and soliciting their responses, this virtual exhibition has contributed to the scholarship of how femininity in the Malay world has been represented through colonial photography.



Fig. 14

Landing page of the exhibition, featuring the three themes of Body, Space and Activity.

Fig. 15

Viewers were asked to comment on a pair of images depicting women dressed in Burmese attire and holding a cheroot (a traditional thin cigar that is open at both ends).

Fig. 16

A compare and contrast question on how viewers perceived Malay femininity.

Courtesy of ArtsEquator

Reclaiming Dignity

Postcards provide historical clues about people, places, dressing and habits. These are artefacts that enrich the layers of historical knowledge that we accumulate of the past. Postcards may also be looked upon as a nostalgic material culture that is part of heritage preservation.

Yet, it is important to recognise that still images captured by the camera have for the longest time served as a basis for the construction of inaccurate perceptions and opinions, stereotypes and half-truths of those being studied, while affording those who engage with them the legitimacy of 'science'.

The two methods of interpreting images described in this article—the inverted gaze and the dialogical encounter—enable us to puncture entrenched colonial and patriarchal fantasies built around the construction of Malay women's frailties, fragilities and femininities as captured in photographic images. Through these alternative ways of seeing, we come to treat the images not as passive artefacts, but as a means to reclaim the dignity of the people who have been silenced, misrepresented or oppressed under various structures of colonial dominance and coercion. 🍎

This article is adapted from 'Being and Becoming Female in the Malay World: Interrogating and Curating the Photo-Archives of Early Singapore', a research project supported by the National Heritage Board's Research Grant.

NOTES

- 1 James Douglas, "Picture Postcards", *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, 16 March 1907, p. 6.
- 2 Mark Wollaeger, "Woolf, Postcards, and the Elision of Race; Colonizing Women in The Voyage Out". *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 8, iss. 1 (2001), 43.
- 3 Paul D. Barclay, "Peddling Postcards and Selling Empire: Image-Making in Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule". *Japanese Studies*, vol. 30, iss. 1 (2010), 81–110.
- 4 Peter M. Burns, "Six Postcards from Arabia: A Visual Discourse of Colonial Travels in the Orient", *Tourist Studies*, vol. 4, iss. 3 (2018), 255–75.
- 5 "Johore Supreme Court". *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 26 October 1927, 9.
- 6 "Selling Obscene Postcards". *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 17 January 1907, 39.
- 7 KTLV, "Photographed on behalf on science; exotic people between 1860 and 1920". See: <https://becomingfemale.piwigo.com/picture?/515/category/6-kitlv>
- 8 The daguerreotype, which was the early form of the camera, was invented in the 1830s. By the 1840s, photography had become wildly popular.
- 9 The term 'misrecognise' has been deployed in photography studies to indicate the shift in one's recognition of the photograph to something else beyond what is originally intended.



Of Memories and Daydreams

Exploring the Revamped Peranakan Museum

The permanent galleries at the recently reopened Peranakan Museum tackle familiar themes with a dazzling array of never-before-seen objects.

Dominic Low
Curator (Peranakan),
Asian Civilisations Museum

↑ Audience dancing along to *samrah*, a Yemeni music and dance form usually performed at Arab Peranakan weddings, at the Armenian Street Party celebrating the reopening of the Peranakan Museum, 2023.

The Peranakan Museum reopened its doors on 17 February 2023 after nearly four years of renovations. Completed in 1912, the eclectic classical building of Tao Nan School was converted into a museum and opened first as the Asian Civilisations Museum in 1997, and then the Peranakan Museum in 2008.

Today, the revamped Peranakan Museum continues to celebrate the vibrant cross-cultural heritage of Peranakan communities in Southeast Asia. Its three floors explore Peranakan identities through the universal themes of Origins, Home and Style respectively. Together they feature more than 800 objects, many of which are now part of Singapore's National Collection and have never before been shown.

Multiple Origins

The Origins gallery on the first floor anchors the question of 'what is Peranakan' squarely in the context of Southeast Asia. Meaning 'local-born', the word 'Peranakan' stems from *anak*, or 'child' in Malay, which was the lingua franca of maritime Southeast Asia since the 15th century.

'Peranakan' has come to refer to mixed-heritage communities born of the melding of ancestral cultures—Chinese, Indian, Arab, European and others—with the indigenous cultures of the Malay-Indonesian world, including Chinese Peranakans, Chitty Melakans (or Peranakan Indians), as well as Jawi and Arab Peranakans.

Inside the Home

The interior of a home reveals the lives of its inhabitants. It is the setting for everyday life and special occasions, private moments and communal gatherings, celebrations and mourning. In *The Poetics of Space* (1994), French philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes that it is in the house where "a great many of our memories are housed... all our lives we come back to them in our daydreams".¹



↑ **TOP**
Botan House (foreground) was located at the junction of Neil Road and Craig Road, Singapore.

"Oct.73"

Creator: unknown
Date: October 1973
Region: Singapore
Material: Kodacolor print
Dimensions: 8.8 × 12.7 cm
Accession no.: 2019-00079
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift in memory of Tan Cheng Siang and Tan Choon Hoe

ABOVE
Tan Kim Tian was a Chinese Peranakan shipping magnate whose company was one of the first to switch from sailing ships to steamships.

Portrait of Tan Kim Tian (1832–1882)

Creator: Ong Kwee Hwuang
Date: 1887
Region: Singapore
Material: watercolour on paper
Dimensions: 100 × 70.5 cm
Accession no.: 2017-00934
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift of the estate of Tan Cheng Siang



↑ The ancestral hall in Botan House, with the ancestral altar in the background, 1968.

Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Library Board

Combining what was previously three galleries to become the single largest gallery in the revamped museum, the Family and Community Life galleries on Level 2 reunite furniture, portraits and other decorative objects that once shared the same home.² The galleries adopt a new method of display that focuses on historical houses and architecture, many of which have since been demolished and are survived only by the objects on view. These objects reveal the identities, tastes, heritage and traditions of the Peranakan families and individuals whose lives they were once a part of.

A case in point is the group of objects from Botan House, a bungalow built around the 1880s at 83 Neil Road, near the junction with Craig Road. Fronted by a carriage porch with Tuscan columns set on tall plinths, it was home to Chinese Peranakan shipping magnate Tan Kim Tian (1832–82) and four generations of his family.



→ A mirror from Botan House.

Mirror

Creator: unknown
Date: late 19th or early 20th century
Region: Singapore
Material: teakwood, glass, silver or aluminium
Dimensions: 133 × 124.5 × 5 cm
Accession no.: 2017-00935
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift of the estate of Tan Cheng Siang

Tan was born in Melaka and came to Singapore as a teenager. He rose through the ranks of Paterson Simons & Co. to become head storekeeper, overseeing its trade in gutta-percha, rattan and pepper. In 1865, he and eldest son Tan Beng Wan (1851–91) founded the Tan Kim Tian and Son Steamship Company. It was one of the first firms in Singapore to replace its fleet of sailing ships with steamships, boasting 11 such vessels by the beginning of the 20th century.

Tan Kim Tian was also the first president of Tan Si Chong Su (陈氏宗祠), the Tan clan temple in Singapore.³ His portrait used to hang in the ancestral hall of Botan House, together with a photograph of Tan Beng Wan. These and a similar mirror seen in the ancestral hall are now displayed in the Family and Community Life galleries.

Brown and Gold

Locally made teakwood furniture combining European and Chinese influences was popular among Peranakans. Teak is a hardwood native to South and Southeast Asia, growing in abundance in Thailand and Myanmar. It lends itself well to the carving of intricate designs that Peranakans generally favoured.

The combination of form, motifs, material and technique displayed by such furniture is characteristically hybrid. Local cabinetmakers were known to use European gilding methods but only applied gold leaf onto the carved decorations, as was the practice of namwood furniture workshops in southern China.⁴ Such gilded pieces came to be popularly known as ‘brown and gold’ furniture.⁵

On display is a sideboard once used in Rosedale at 148 Killiney Road, the home of Chia Keng Tye (1884–1961), a Chinese Peranakan tennis and musical pioneer as well as an agent of the Mercantile Bank of India before the Second World War.

↓ This sideboard used to be in Rosedale at 148 Killiney Road, the home of Chia Keng Tye and his descendants.

Sideboard

Creator: unknown
Date: early 20th century
Region: Melaka
Material: teakwood
Dimensions: 227 × 168 × 65 cm
Accession no.: 2018-00810
Collection of: Peranakan Museum





A section of the Family and Community Life galleries at the Peranakan Museum showing two of the works in the series, *Sheltered Dreams* (2023), by Lavender Chang.

From the beginning of the 20th century, it became increasingly fashionable to replace the blackwood furniture that traditionally furnished formal spaces within the home, such as the reception hall (*thia besar*), with teakwood furniture.

Collaborating with Communities

Like all homes, Peranakan homes vary—from *attap* houses in idyllic kampongs to shophouses in the bustling heart of the city, from villas of the past to the Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats of today, where almost 78 percent of Singaporeans live.⁶

For a contemporary art commission in dialogue with the historical homes featured in the galleries, Peranakan Museum worked with the Arab Network@Singapore, Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore, Eurasian Association Singapore and the Peranakan Association Singapore. The museum invited each organisation to nominate a member from their respective communities who resides in an HDB flat to participate by allowing the artist to create the work in their living rooms while they slept.

The result was *Sheltered Dreams*, a new series by Singaporean artist Lavender Chang who focuses on conceptual photography. Titled in reference to Bachelard's aforementioned writings, these photographic works of art are portraits of Peranakan homes today. Chang used her signature long-exposure photographic technique to capture the passage of time in a single image, immortalising the traces of everyday life in the heart of the home.



One among four portraits of homes belonging to different Peranakan communities.

Sheltered Dreams, Marine Terrace

Creator: Lavender Chang
Date: 2023
Region: Singapore
Material: archival fine art print
Dimensions: 80 × 65 cm
On loan from the artist, commissioned by the Peranakan Museum

Making Batik

The batik gallery is the first of the galleries on Level 3 that focus on the theme of style. It draws connections between the development of batik and the demand for Indian trade cloths which were made to local tastes in the Indonesian archipelago and traded in the prosperous port cities along the northern coast of Java from the 13th century, well before the rise of the Mataram kingdom in the 17th century.⁷

Local precursors of batik include the *kain simbut* of Sunda and the *sarita* cloths of Sulawesi, where rice paste was used as resist.⁸ The range of motifs characteristic of batik is also wide-ranging, with some patterns found on stone sculptures dating from the Singhasari period (1222–96). By the early 18th century, Javanese batik was produced on a commercial scale for export.⁹

Batik workshops established and run by Indo-European women like Mevr Fisfer (circa 1825–1905) were in operation from around the mid-19th century into the first decades of the 20th century before the Japanese Occupation of the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) from 1942 to 1945. Known as Batik Belanda, the batiks created by these workshops often depicted motifs inspired by Dutch fashion and craft magazines, as well as Christian symbols and scenes from European fairy tales.

Other innovations by Indo-European batik makers included the introduction of a lace-like border with scalloped edges as well as the practice of writing the name of the batik workshop in wax and dyeing it onto the cloth. Fisfer was one of the pioneering batik makers in Pekalongan, and among the first to sign batiks with her name.¹⁰

The signature functioned as a mark of quality and ownership of design at a time when imitation was widespread and difficult to control. Although Chinese-owned batik workshops also adopted this practice, signed batiks were rare, especially those made for domestic use.



This piece of batik is signed by B. Fisfer, the owner of the batik workshop that produced it.

Sarong

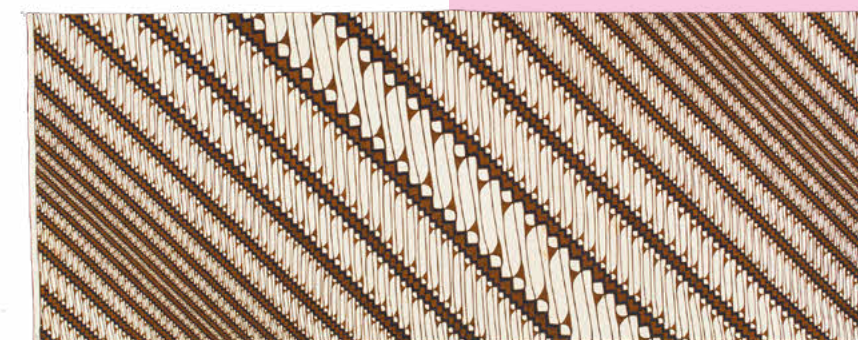
Creator: Mevr B. Fisfer
Date: late 19th century
Region: Java, Pekalongan
Material: cotton (drawn batik)
Dimensions: 103.4 × 105 cm
Accession no.: 2018-01126
Collection of: Peranakan Museum

BOTTOM

Batik created by Chinese Peranakan K. R. T. Hardjonagoro with the *parang rusak* (broken knives) motif.

Skirt cloth (*kain panjang*)

Creator: K. R. T. Hardjonagoro
Date: 1980s
Region: Java, Surakarta
Material: cotton (drawn batik)
Dimensions: 265.2 × 103.5 cm
Accession no.: 1991-00110
Collection of: National Museum of Singapore





These door curtains would have hung over the doorway into a wedding chamber.

Pair of hangings

Creator: unknown
Date: early 20th century
Region: Sumatra, Padang
Material: silk, metal thread, mirror discs, sequins
Dimensions: 308.5 × 81 cm each
Accession no.: 2016-0064
Collection of: Peranakan Museum



The *ambi* (tear-drop shape) motif reveals connections to Indian cloths traded to Southeast Asia.

Bedspreads (*kain spreii*)

Creator: unknown
Date: early 20th century
Region: Indonesia
Material: cotton (drawn batik)
Dimensions: 136.7 × 233.2 cm
Accession no.: 2014-00950
Collection of: Peranakan Museum

Decorating the Wedding Bed and Chamber

Batiks were not only made into articles of clothing but also decorative textiles to furnish the home. Bedspreads were used to dress the wedding bed that stood at the heart of the Chinese Peranakan bridal chamber. The colour red was favoured because of its customary associations with happiness and fertility. In fact, Lasem was a batik-making centre on the northern coast of Java renowned for the shade of red it was able to produce in the 19th century. Auspicious symbols like phoenixes, peonies, and butterflies preponderate,

while the *ambi* (tear-drop shape) motif reveals connections to Indian cloths traded to Southeast Asia.

Great care was taken to prepare the wedding bed given that it was where the next generation would be conceived, as well as the belief that a beautiful bed promised a happy marriage ahead and provided a sense of pride for the family.¹² Among the various rites that were conducted following Chinese customs and informed by family preferences was the An Chng ceremony. In this ritual, the bed was blessed by having a boy whose parents were still living roll across it three times, in the hope that the newlyweds would soon conceive a baby boy.¹³

In addition to decorating the wedding bed, a wide array of Peranakan needlework—beadwork and embroidery made by or to the tastes of Peranakans—was employed to transform the everyday interior of a room into a symbolic space for rituals and festivities. Valances and door curtains decorated the doorway into the wedding chamber, providing privacy for its occupants. They are among the largest examples of Peranakan needlework and were probably made by professionals, unlike smaller pieces, which were more likely to have been made by hand by Peranakan women themselves.¹⁴

A popular design is the depiction of lions playing with a ball. Known as ‘foo dogs’ in the West, these creatures are associated with Buddhist deities, for whom they sometimes serve as protectors or mounts. They similarly played a protective and prestigious role as seen at the entrances of temples, official buildings and private residences where lion statues are often found.

Cosmopolitan Supplies

For the first time, the breadth and richness of Peranakan needlework are on display in the permanent galleries. New wall displays of materials and regional styles reveal connections to the traditional 12-day Chinese Peranakan



Glass seed beads found in Edna Chong's sewing box.

Strings of beads on cards

Creator: unknown
Date: early 20th century
Region: Europe; found in Singapore
Material: glass, cardboard
Dimensions: various
Accession no.: 2017-00242
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift of the Lim Family in memory of Edna Chong Kim Neo



This gilded silver necklace was adapted from South Indian examples, which were usually made of gold.

Necklace (*addigai*)

Creator: unknown
Date: early 20th century
Region: Singapore
Material: gilded silver
Dimensions: 17 × 13 cm
Accession no.: 2016-00641
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift of Mrs Knight Glenn Jeyasingam



wedding ceremony while celebrating craftsmanship and design.

Residing in port cities at the confluence of trade routes in Southeast Asia, Peranakans were able to obtain a wide variety of materials coming from near and far, including Chinese silks, European glass seed beads and Indian gold threads. The contents in Edna Chong Kim Neo's (1916–72) sewing box offer a case study, revealing among other things, how she arranged hanks of European-made glass seed beads onto cards as she prepared to work. According to her niece, Chong was a *nyonya* who made a living creating Peranakan needlework from home as she did not own a shop.

Rocaille beads (seed beads with no flat sides), like those in Chong's sewing box, and Charlotte beads (glass seed beads with one or more flat sides) are commonly found in Peranakan beadwork, often on the same object. They are known collectively as *manek potong* (cut beads).¹⁵ European glass seed beads were mass produced from the late 15th

century onwards, while smaller and more colourful beads were made possible by technological advances in glassmaking around 1760. Venice, Bohemia and Lyons were well-known centres of bead production in the early 20th century.

Diverse Jewellery

Ranging from bejewelled belts to delicate *kerosang*, the next gallery examines jewellery used by Peranakans at different stages of their lives. One of the highlights among the heirlooms on display is a necklace (*addigai*) donated by Mrs Knight Glenn Jeyasingam, the author of the cookbook *Foods of my Ancestors: The Best of Peranakan Indian—Chitty Melaka Cuisine*. This necklace was adapted from South Indian examples, which were usually made of gold. Gilding silver was used to prevent tarnishing but the practice was not popular in India. Crafted by Indian jewellery makers in Singapore, Peranakan Indian jewellery reveal a mixture of various cultural influences.¹⁶



← A kebaya made by Edna Chong, featuring a bucolic scene of two cats eyeing a sparrow from behind tall grass.

Kebaya

Creator: Edna Chong Kim Neo
Date: 20th century
Region: Europe; tailored in Singapore
Material: cotton voile and machine-made embroidery
Dimensions: 121.0 × 67.0 × 0.3 cm
Accession no.: 2019-00594
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift of the Lim Family in memory of Edna Chong Kim Neo

↓ A white suit that belonged to pioneering artist Low Kway Song, who is seen wearing an outfit like this in many surviving photographs.

Suit

Creator: Saint Gents Tailor
Date: 20th century
Region: Singapore
Material: cotton
Dimensions: various
Accession no.: 2018-00380
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift of the Hall of Phoenix and Peony

Changing Fashions

The Fashion gallery concludes the journey through the galleries. It explores diverse, hybrid and evolving styles through over 130 objects, including contemporary designs, footwear, bags, wedding accessories and a chronological display of the iconic *sarong kebaya* (a tubular skirt cloth worn with a blouse). Of note is a kebaya made by the aforementioned Edna Chong, which is rare given that the names of kebaya makers are often lost to history.

And, for the first time, men's fashion is featured in the Peranakan Museum. Sartorial choices of Peranakan men often differed along generational lines. In the late 19th century, older Chinese Peranakan men continued to wear the *baju lokchuan*—a jacket with knotted buttons worn over loose trousers. Unlike similar jackets from southern China that were made of silk, cotton or linen was used to adapt to the warmer climate of Southeast Asia.

Hybrid ensembles resulted from the combination of non-Western dress with accessories such as pocket watches and brimmed hats. On the other hand, young Peranakan men favoured Western-style suits—tailored jacket and a pair of trousers cut from the same material at its most basic—as the outfit of choice for



↓ Painter Low Kway Song dressed casually in a sarong and shirt at home.

"May 72"

Creator: unknown
Date: 1972
Region: Singapore or Melaka
Material: Kodachrome print
Dimensions: 6.5 × 8.5 cm
Accession no.: 2018-00237
Collection of: Peranakan Museum
Gift of the Hall of Phoenix and Peony



business affairs and social events.¹⁷ The *baju tutup* (closed coat) was a popular alternative in the early 20th century. Sarongs were worn by Peranakan men in informal settings, as were *celana batik* (batik trousers) in the Dutch East Indies. These were often paired with white, lightweight Chinese-style jackets that were collarless and long-sleeved.

Pioneering artist Low Kway Song (1889–1982) is seen wearing a white suit in many surviving photographs. At home, however, he wore a sarong and shirt. Low was a prolific artist and was the first to be paid a four-figure fee when he was commissioned in 1927 to paint a portrait of the magnate Oei Tiong Ham (1866–1924). He later became the pastor of the Malacca Straits Chinese Methodist Church, where services were conducted in Baba Malay.

Work in Progress

The reopening of the Peranakan Museum by no means signals a conclusion. Although the relative strength of the museum currently lies in objects that illustrate the lives of Chinese Peranakans, multiple efforts remain ongoing to acquire more examples of material culture from the diverse Peranakan communities of Southeast Asia.

The museum advocates furthering discussions and broadening perspectives on Peranakan cultures and identities. This is achieved not only through its growing collection, permanent galleries and special exhibitions, but also by way of programmes, academic lectures and by working closely with Peranakan communities in Singapore and the wider region in the years to come. 🍊

NOTES

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 8.
- 2 Ceramics, including both nyonyaware and other types of ceramics used by the various Peranakan communities, are presented in the Ceramics & Food Culture gallery, the last gallery on this level.
- 3 Song Ong Siang, *100 Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (London: John Murray, 1923).
- 4 Ho Wing Meng, *Straits Chinese Furniture: A Collector's Guide* (Singapore: Times Book International, 2003).
- 5 Ong Poh Neo, *Brown and Gold: Furniture from the Late 19th Century to the Mid-20th Century* (Singapore: P.N. Ong, 1994).
- 6 Department of Statistics Singapore, 'Households', 2022, <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/households/households/latest-data>.
- 7 Rens Heringa and Harmen Veldhuisen, *Fabric of Enchantment: Batik from the North Coast of Java* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996).
- 8 A substance applied to protect particular areas of a design from dye penetration.
- 9 Peter Lee, *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2014).
- 10 Harmen C. Veldhuisen, *Batik Belanda 1840–1940: Dutch Influence in Batik from Java* (Jakarta: Gaya Favorit Press, 1993).
- 11 Alit Djajasoebrata, *Flowers from the Universe: Textiles of Java* (Volendam: LM Publishers, 2018).
- 12 Edmond Chin, *Gilding the Phoenix: The Straits Chinese and Their Jewelry* (Singapore: National Museum, 1993).
- 13 Cheo Kim Ban, *A Baba Wedding* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2009).
- 14 Eng-Lee Seok Chee, *Festive Expressions: Nyonya Beadwork and Embroidery* (Singapore: National Museum, 1989).
- 15 Cheah Hwei Fen, *Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nyonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010).
- 16 Samuel S. Dhoraisingam, *Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka: Indian Babas and Nyonyas – Chitty Melaka* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2012).
- 17 Khoo Joo Ee, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Pepin Press, 1996).

Meet the Expert

Muhammad Noor Aliff Bin Ghani

Assistant Director (Collections & Exhibitions),
Heritage Institutions, National Heritage Board

An Assistant Director of Heritage Institutions at the National Heritage Board (NHB), Muhammad Noor Aliff Bin Ghani manages the collections and exhibitions of the Malay Heritage Centre, Indian Heritage Centre and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.

Aliff is responsible for the execution of special exhibitions. This entails managing exhibition schedules, developing exhibition designs, and dealing with conservation and display matters, to fabrication and site renovation, installation of artefacts and gallery maintenance.

The exhibitions he has produced include the Peranakan Museum's *Great Peranakans* (2015), Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) *Angkor* (2018), Malay Heritage Centre's *Cerita* (2022) and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall's *Connections Across Oceans* (2023). He was also heavily involved in the refresh of ACM's permanent galleries from 2015 to 2021 and the recent revamp of the Peranakan Museum. Currently, he is working on the Indian Heritage Centre's upcoming special exhibition *Ente Veedu, My Home: Malayalees in Singapore* and the revamp of the Malay Heritage Centre's galleries.

Aliff introduces *MUSE SG* to the behind-the-scenes world of producing an exhibition and walks us through the many steps that take place before its opening day.

01.

HI, ALIFF! PLEASE TELL US WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS FIELD.

Perhaps I can start by explaining how NHB entered my life. After graduating with a marketing management degree in 2010, I started an internship at NHB's Facilities Marketing department. When my internship ended, I found a fulltime position at the National Museum's Philanthropy department where I helped raise funds for the museum by organising gala dinners and raising cash and in-kind sponsorships. I subsequently moved to ACM in the same role.

In 2014, there was an opening in ACM's Exhibitions division and I thought to myself, 'Why not?' Of course, it would be a 180-degree change. As part of my job at the Philanthropy department, I was used to dressing smartly to attend events like high teas and dinners to pitch proposals to the museum's donors. But I felt that time was ripe for a change; I was ready to 'get my hands dirty'. Hence I switched to being an exhibitions manager, working together with curators and conservators to produce and organise exhibitions as well as set up galleries.

02.

MANY OF US WOULD HAVE VISITED A MUSEUM EXHIBITION BEFORE, BUT FEW KNOW WHAT HAPPENS BEHIND THE SCENES. CAN YOU SHARE WITH US THE WORK YOU DO AS AN EXHIBITION MANAGER?

There is a great deal of planning that goes into an exhibition. This area of work requires technical knowledge, analytical planning and critical thinking skills as well as attention to the minutest of details. Curators provide the content and may have a display 'wish list'. They may envision, for example, a particular piece of textile to be 'floating' vertically when displayed. I take this suggestion to the conservators to find out if such a mode of display is practical and can be executed, but more importantly whether



Muhammad Noor Aliff Bin Ghani manages the collections and exhibitions of the National Heritage Board's Heritage Institutions.



↑ Aliff checking the light intensity that an artefact is exposed to using a lux meter. Excessive lighting can cause damage to artefacts.

it would damage the artefact. After discussing and brainstorming ideas with the exhibition designer, we advise curators on the most feasible and safest way to display the object. As a team, we try to give meaning to the display and contextualise it. This helps provide the best experience for audiences and enables them to fully appreciate the artefacts.

One example is the traditional Chinese Peranakan kitchen setting at the Peranakan Museum's Ceramics Gallery. Typically, we display porcelainware such as the *kamcheng* (a type of covered porcelain jar), ornate glazed ceramic wall tiles and traditional kitchen implements like the *batu giling* (grindstone). But how can we integrate all these artefacts into a meaningful yet dynamic display? For example, can we show the *kamcheng* in such a way as if someone is opening its lid without compromising the integrity and safety of the artefact? In order to achieve the ideal result, we work with specialists such as the mounting team.

Also, one of the last touches for a display is lighting. As illumination can accentuate the features of an object and 'bring it to life', we study how to stage the artefact using directional lighting like spotlights and under-shelf lamps.

When producing an exhibition, I ensure accessibility by adhering to the principles of universal design—in other words, 'design for all'. This means that the design of products, architecture and environments is

attuned to the needs of as many people as possible, regardless of ability or age. The physically challenged, children and elderly, for example, should all be able to experience the exhibition with ease. For instance, showcases are set at a certain angle and height so that everyone can view them easily. Text size and font type used in the accompanying displays are also given significant consideration to ensure their legibility.

A key aspect of exhibition work is the care and maintenance of exhibits. Our work does not stop once an exhibition is launched. After the grand opening fanfare, the team carries out regular checks and maintenance of the artefacts, such as surface cleaning and preventive conservation work. I also ensure that other aspects of an exhibition run smoothly, such as security, climate environmental monitoring and light management. Gallery maintenance is usually scheduled on Mondays when the Heritage Institutions are closed to the public to minimise disruption to visitors.

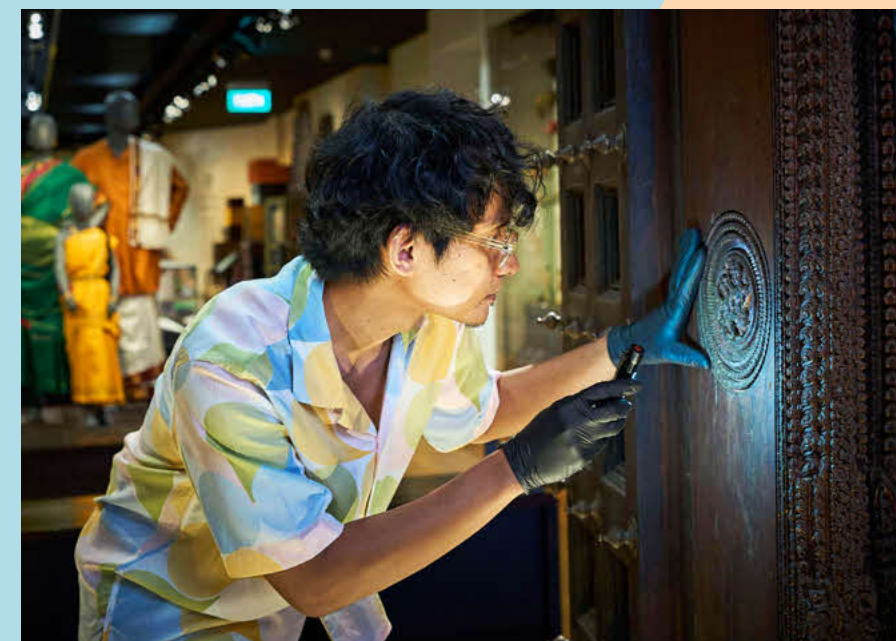
Finally, another aspect of my work is collections management. We may at times have to borrow rare items from overseas and local institutions or lenders for an exhibition. In such cases, I oversee the entire loan process, including freight, logistics, insurance, legal paperwork, commissioning custom-made crates for the artefacts for transport, packing, courier management and so on. There are even occasions when supervision on the airport tarmac is required; staff will then have to ensure that artefacts are loaded or unloaded carefully onto the plane so that nothing is damaged while in transit.

03. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE MAINTENANCE AND CARE OF EXHIBITIONS?

There are many considerations when deciding how each artefact is to be displayed, depending on its size, material and fragility. One of the key elements in any exhibition is lighting. We have to

↓ **BELOW**
Aliff checking for grime and any other anomaly on displayed artefacts. Gallery maintenance is usually carried out on Mondays when the Heritage Institutions are closed to the public to minimise disruption.

BOTTOM
Aliff putting Art-Sorb into a special 'oven' to calibrate their humidity control. Art-Sorb is exhibition-grade silica material that is placed within showcases to regulate humidity levels.



ensure that the lighting is sufficiently bright for viewers. However, harsh light can also damage artefacts, particularly those made of paper and textiles. Materials may tarnish or pigments and ink may fade over time when inappropriate lighting is used. Therefore, we have to regularly check the displays with a lighting meter that provides readings for brightness and ultraviolet intensity.

Another crucial factor is the relative humidity in the display cases. The presence of moisture and fluctuations in humidity can wreak havoc on an artefact, causing paper to warp and materials like metals to degrade due

to rust, corrosion and even mould. To cite a very relatable example: during Singapore's partial lockdown at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, shops selling leather goods like shoes and bags had to contend with mouldy stock when they reopened. The culprit was unstable humidity levels caused by the extended absence of air-conditioning in the closed shopping centres.

Humidity levels have to be kept in check in order to prolong the lifespan of our artefacts. Besides being airtight, each display case is equipped with a data logger that tracks the relative humidity and temperature of the microenvironment. We maintain the humidity level by using a moisture-sensitive silica material that absorbs moisture and condensation from the surrounding environment. Some artefacts are on open display, meaning they are not kept within glass cases, which makes them particularly prone to dust. For these artefacts, we surface-clean them regularly with a conservation-grade vacuum and brushes.

04. WHAT ARE SOME NEW TECHNOLOGIES OR MATERIALS EMPLOYED IN EXHIBITIONS IN RECENT YEARS?

Exhibition showcases have vastly improved in quality. One of the bugbears in exhibitions used to be the reflective surfaces of glass display cases, which tended to get in the way of visitors viewing the artefacts comfortably and clearly. These days, we use non-reflective glass for an optimal viewing experience. Similarly, we now have access to seamless large vertical glass panels which were not available before. In the past, the glass panels used for showcases had seams and joints that disrupted the visitor experience.

Thanks to hydraulics technology, these large glass panels and doors can now be opened and closed easily. The opening mechanism of showcases as well as their general aesthetics have

also become a lot sleeker and more sophisticated. Gone are bulky parts and heavy hinges; these days, showcases can be opened with just the touch of a button.

Another development in showcase design is the installation of concealed projectors and speakers behind glass boxes. This enables us to project images and include sounds to create a more immersive experience for audiences. Static objects can now be augmented with interactive media to enhance their content.

These advancements in material engineering and technology have greatly expanded the possibilities in exhibition-making.

05.

CAN YOU SHARE WITH US A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE IN THE COURSE OF YOUR WORK?

In 2018, I carried out a 'door-to-door' courier service to return loaned artefacts to the Musée Guimet in Paris. The crated artefacts were statues from the ancient Burmese empire that had been displayed at ACM's *Angkor* exhibition. As a courier I was responsible for the artefacts, so I had to make sure I was always physically present with them.

The journey spanned a total of 25 nerve-wrecking hours! My day at ACM began at 5am when I loaded the artefacts onto the air-ride truck. This is a special vehicle that uses an air suspension mechanism to provide a smooth ride and minimise any abrupt movements to the priceless cargo. An hour later, I reached the airport. There, all 42 crates containing the artefacts were loaded securely onto the plane; throughout the trip, I never let the crates out of my sight.

It was not a straightforward journey to Paris as we were travelling on a cargo plane. There was a three-hour stopover at Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates where the plane collected more cargo. At this point, there were also horses being boarded onto the

plane, accompanied by their breeders! While the breeders checked on their horses, I checked on my crates.

From Sharjah, it was another eight hours or so to London for another stopover. There, I checked on the crates again. At last, the plane landed at its final destination, Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, where all precious cargo was unloaded. Then it was a land transfer to Paris via another air-ride truck. Five hours later, I arrived at the Musée Guimet safely with the crates, finally concluding my 25-hour courier duty. It was only then that I was able to breathe again!

06.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY OR FIND MEANINGFUL ABOUT YOUR WORK?

Just as every exhibition is different, no two curators or conservators are the same. As an exhibition manager, I work very closely with a team of very talented people: curators, conservators, collection managers, exhibition designers and other specialists such as mounters, lighting technicians and art handlers. My job not only requires technical expertise, but also soft skills like people management.



As much as on-the-job training is important, it can never be sufficient. As the museum landscape is ever-evolving, I keep abreast of new advancements and technologies to discover new and innovative ways of doing things that would serve our audiences better.

An exhibition is a complex undertaking. Just mounting a single artefact is an intricate process that involves many painstaking hours. The microenvironment has to be just right for the artefacts to 'live'. I often look at a showcase and wonder to myself, 'Are the artefacts snug and comfortable in their new homes?' And when I see a visitor admiring the artefact, I beam with pride. It's an indescribable feeling! ♦

Aliff (in foreground) supervising the installation of an artefact for the *Angkor* exhibition held at the Asian Civilisations Museum in 2018. He undertook a 25-hour journey with some of the loaned artefacts to ensure that they arrived back in Paris safely.

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