



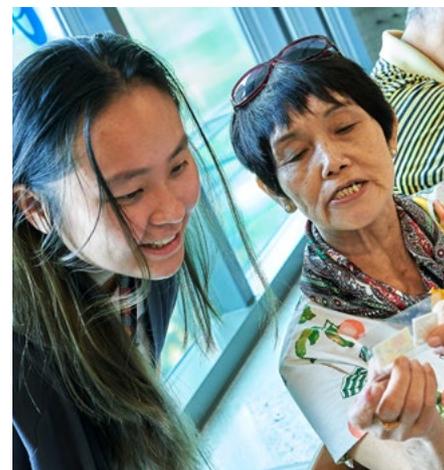
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# A note from the *MUSE SG* team

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Cordoned-off tables and seats at Chinatown Complex Food Centre, 22 April 2020. The photograph is part of Bob Lee's series, *The Empty Seats*, exhibited at *Picturing the Pandemic: A Visual Record of COVID-19* at the National Museum of Singapore.

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The ongoing pandemic has profoundly impacted all our lives, and as museums and heritage institutions rely heavily on visitorship and programmes, the sector has taken a huge hit from closures and safety restrictions. Although physical activities have largely been curtailed, the National Heritage Board (NHB) has gamely pivoted to the virtual sphere to continue connecting with the public with our heritage offerings. At the same time, we continue to innovate to stay relevant in today's rapidly changing world.

In the previous years, *MUSE SG* explored the themes of place history and intangible cultural heritage. Moving on, the new editions of *MUSE SG* will focus on the work, expertise and collections of NHB. We are also taking a hybrid approach: Our content will be available at NHB's [Roots.gov.sg](https://www.roots.gov.sg) website, along with supplementary digital content.

In this issue, the first set of three articles highlights how NHB has responded to challenges brought about by the pandemic. The National Museum of Singapore embarked on a contemporary collecting strategy to put up an exhibition about the local COVID-19 experience, and NHB's digitalisation efforts were ramped up to offer digital programmes. Meanwhile, the *HeritageCares* team sought out alternative ways of engaging vulnerable groups in Singapore despite physical distancing.

The next three features provide insights into new curatorial strategies and modes of working at the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Indian Heritage Centre, both of which are increasingly adopting the model of co-creation and creative partnerships for their exhibitions. The article about NHB's road to the successful inscription of local hawker culture on the UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity sheds light on a hard-won victory that was only made possible with the participation of all segments of society. The results of these endeavours have been positive—a testament to the power of collaboration and consultation with communities and external partners.

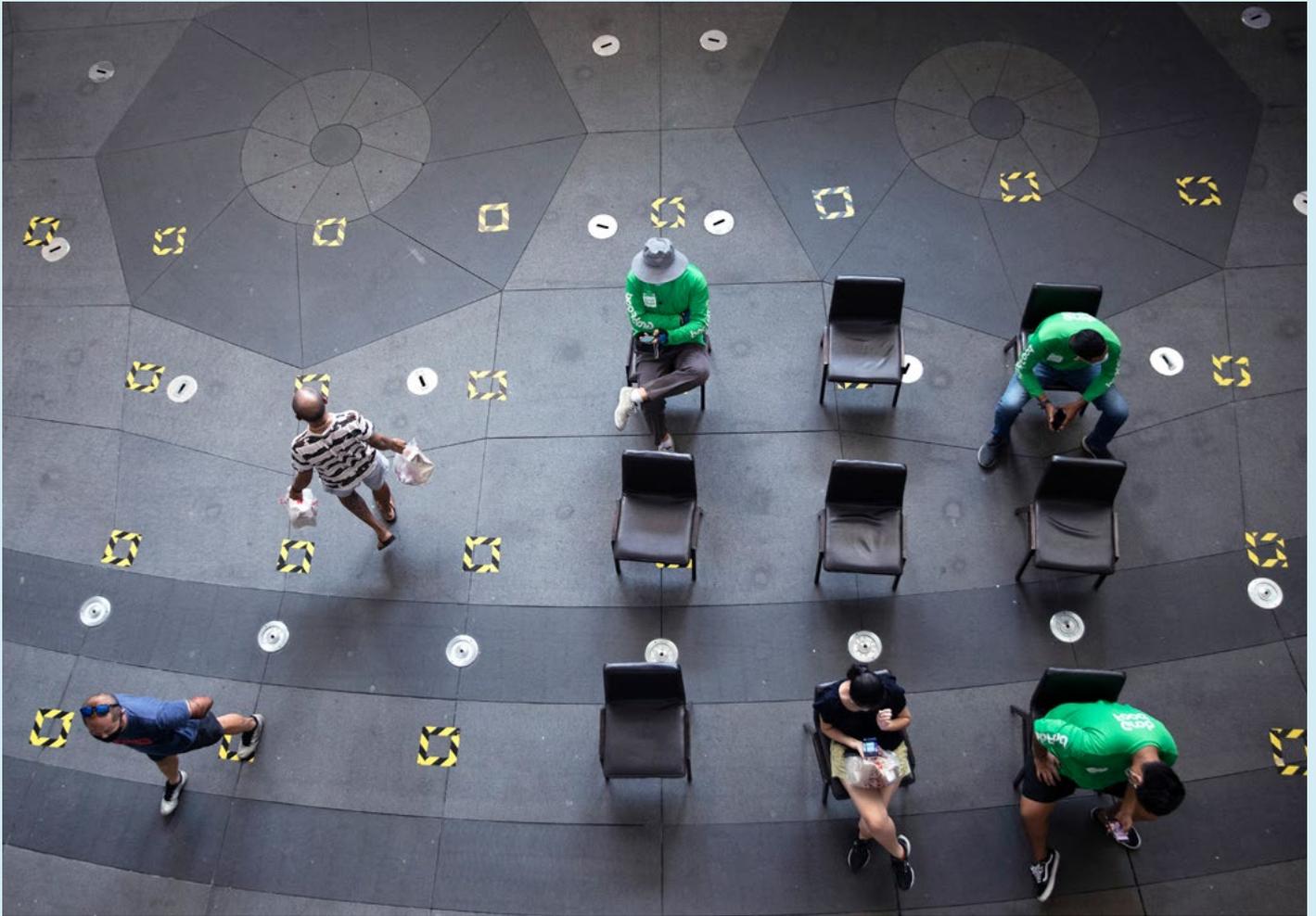
On the occasion of the Preservation of Sites and Monuments' 50th anniversary and the Museum Roundtable's 25th anniversary, we present two pieces looking back on the journeys of these indispensable entities in heritage work. Finally, we offer a selection of artefacts from our National Collection by conservators and a conservation scientist, who share intimate stories of the objects. We also hear from a paper conservator about her work as well as some tips on how to keep our books in tip-top shape in Singapore's climate!

We hope the stories in this issue of *MUSE SG* will inspire you to move forward together with us in these uncertain times, and we can't wait to see you again at our museums, heritage institutions and programmes!

**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](mailto:muse@nhb.gov.sg)





## Picturing the Pandemic: Curatorial Strategies for Unprecedented Times

With Singapore and the world buffeted by the COVID-19 crisis, the National Museum of Singapore embarks on a contemporary collecting strategy to respond to the times.

Text by **Daniel Tham**, Senior Curator, National Museum of Singapore

At the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the National Museum of Singapore started working on an initiative that is now known as Collecting Contemporary Singapore. This signalled the museum's new direction in actively documenting and collecting its present, responding to significant events as they occur. Ten months after its launch, the initiative

culminated in *Picturing the Pandemic: A Visual Record of COVID-19*, an exhibition of contemporary materials relating to the local experience of the pandemic, unveiled in February 2021.

Putting up our first exhibition of this nature and in such unprecedented times, the National Museum curatorial team had to work around

certain challenges due to pandemic restrictions; at the same time, we also had the opportunity to develop fresh curatorial strategies for presenting new, contemporary material that reflects an event that has profoundly impacted all our lives.



**ABOVE**  
Opening scene of Adar Ng and Dave Lim's short film, *The Spaces Between Us*.



**LEFT**  
How Hwee Young's photograph of Waterway Point shopping mall in Punggol from her *Spaces* series, 17 May 2020.

### Documenting through Commission

One of the first projects under this initiative was the commissioning of five local photographers—Bob Lee, Brian Teo, Edwin Koo, How Hwee Young and Zakaria Zainal—to visually document the range of experiences of the pandemic across different segments of society in Singapore. The idea of putting together a visual record of the pandemic was well aligned with the museum's collection strength of photography in charting and presenting the changes in Singapore's urban and social landscape through the years. In particular, we recognised the

role of photography as an accessible means of both documenting and remembering not just what happened during this period in Singapore history, but, importantly, what it looked like, through the lenses and perspectives of the photographers.

The five photographers brought to the table a range of experience and approaches to social documentary photography. Many of them had photojournalistic backgrounds and, crucially, a keen eye for compelling stories. The latter was central to our brief of covering the experiences of different communities and demographics in various contexts, ranging from home to work and, more broadly, everyday life as impacted by the pandemic. This was an angle that we felt would contribute to a deeper social documentation of Singapore's pandemic experience, and complemented the museum's own role in capturing and representing the people of Singapore.

The shoots took place largely between April and June 2020—mostly during the circuit breaker—and just as this documentation was winding down, it was announced on 23 June that Singapore would hold its general election on 10 July. The museum quickly dispatched two of our photographers, Koo and Teo, to cover the election as an extension of our commission,

**Museum exhibitions are commonly perceived as showcasing objects from the museum's collection. The *Picturing the Pandemic* exhibition was quite different. It was a response to a dramatic event happening outside the museum which was the COVID-19 pandemic. We could not stand aside as curators and let things pass by.**

**The exhibition clearly marked a shift in our thinking and approach to recording this crisis. It is our collective expression together with those of the photographers and the people who were featured in these images. It is about the power of stories to engage in all periods of time, whether contemporary or past.**

**Iskander Mydin, Curatorial Fellow** —  
overall reflections on putting the exhibition together

**The film *The Spaces Between Us* invites visitors to consider the pluralities of the pandemic experience in Singapore. As the only film in a photography exhibition, I found that it presented issues in a different but equally engaging way. Being an observational piece with no scripted dialogue meant that we had to find ways to draw out the nuances of the stories and filmmaking, which we achieved by inviting the filmmakers to record audio clips explaining their thought processes.**

**Rachel Eng, Assistant Curator** — *The Spaces Between Us*

recognising how significant it was for an election to be held under these circumstances. For us, this was very much part of ‘rapid response collecting’, a notion popularised by the Victoria and Albert Museum in its efforts to acquire contemporary objects in quick response to major moments in recent history.

In the same month of June, our visual documentation project expanded in a different way. With the announcement of the end of circuit breaker and the commencement of Singapore’s phased reopening on 2 June, we commissioned a pair of local filmmakers, Adar Ng and Dave Lim, to document Singapore’s journey of reopening and recovery through the medium of film. The short film they produced, approached as an observational, ethnographic work, was titled *The Spaces Between Us*. It complemented the photographic stories by extending the visual documentation beyond the circuit breaker, and by offering a more meditative and poignant reflection on our relationships with space and the different communities that inhabit it.

### **Makings of an Exhibition**

With the richness of the material submitted, the museum’s curators began reviewing the stories for exhibition. While the idea of holding an exhibition of the material was always on the horizon, we were convinced, upon viewing the submissions, that it was best to present it to the public as soon

as possible, while memories and experiences were still fresh. Furthermore, as a museum, we see our role not just in documenting such historic moments in Singapore’s history, but also playing an active part in uplifting the people of Singapore in challenging times such as these.

Because of the tight timeline to open the exhibition in February 2021, but also as a reflection of the museum’s new Collecting Contemporary Singapore initiative, this marked the first time the entire curatorial team was involved in curating an exhibition together. The sections of the exhibition were derived from the main themes that surfaced from the submissions, with the respective photo stories grouped according to those themes. Different curators were assigned to curate each section, and they worked with exhibition designers on the best display arrangements for each story—an opportunity relished by the team, as working on materials submitted in digital format allowed for much latitude and creativity with how the images and stories could be presented.

### **A Day in the Life**

The opening section of the exhibition, *A Day in the Life*, brings to the forefront the museum’s collecting and curatorial interest in personal stories. It assembles stories that offer a glimpse into the everyday lives of different people involved in or affected by the pandemic. The first image that greets visitors stepping into the



Lightboxes introducing the stories presented in the exhibition’s opening section, *A Day in the Life*.



gallery is that of a frontline nurse with Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, displayed through a large lightbox, with the rest of the story presented on the reverse. While a more obvious opening image might have been a dramatic or even heroic one, the curatorial selection was for Bob Lee's image of a nurse resting in the hospital pantry at the end of a long shift, as seen through an open doorway. This conveys in an understated, but powerful, way of how we as viewers are looking into the lives of others from the outside.

The rest of the stories in this section adopt a consistent treatment as a means of leading visitors towards a range of biographical experiences of the pandemic. These include Brian Teo's intimate look at a child's experience of home-based learning, and How Hwee Young's coverage of the ways in which our national para-

athletes past and present have adapted during the circuit breaker.

### Essential Workers

The next section, Essential Workers, zooms in on a topic that came to be hotly debated during the pandemic, and, through the presentation of related stories, poses the question: what and who is essential? As a museum that had to close its doors during the circuit breaker, the question hit home for us and became a personal and even existential one. With this section, we honour the people we consider to be essential, and allow visitors to come face to face with those who worked tirelessly during this period.

Bob Lee's *Unsung Heroes*, a series of portraits of workers involved in

essential work during the circuit breaker, is presented prominently as a wall feature—a fitting tribute to each worker's contributions with the rich details in the portraits allowing their personalities and vocations to shine through. Each portrait is accompanied by a handwritten account by the subject, reflecting on their experience of working during the pandemic. This is complemented by *The Empty Seats*, another series by Lee, which pairs portraits of hawkers posing in front of their stalls presenting their food in takeout containers, with scenes of empty tables and seats at the hawker centres where they work. This became our inspiration for presenting this series using installations of empty circular seats, referencing the ones commonly found at our hawker centres.



I feel safe coming to work everyday because my company place a lot of safety measure during this period and give me a lot of safety equipments. Being an essential worker, I still have to do my job and it is a bit hard. These safety measures gives me confidence and encourage me to do my job better during this difficult time.

RF  
Robert Rajendran  
25/5/2020

**LEFT**

Portrait of Robert Rajendran s/o Samikannu, waste operator at Sembcorp, 6 May 2020, as part of Bob Lee's *Unsung Heroes* series.

**ABOVE**

Robert's handwritten account of working during the circuit breaker.

Display of Bob Lee's *The Empty Seats* series in the foreground, with Edwin Koo's wall-mounted *Community Healthcare* and How Hwee Young's projected *Singapore General Hospital* in the background.



The sections, *A Day in the Life* and *Essential Workers*, use people's stories to tell the larger story of COVID-19 in Singapore. This distinguishes the exhibition from something like a newspaper article, because little-known stories and small details shine through. I focused less on 'what happened' and more 'how did you experience it' in each section. For that to work, I had to make sure the voices of the people in the photos came through in their own stories.

**Miriam Yeo, Assistant Curator** — *A Day in the Life* and *Essential Workers*

The rest of the section returns our attention to the area of healthcare. While the exhibition began with nurses on the frontline, two other series here expand our view of the ongoing and often unseen work undertaken by healthcare professionals and institutions. These include Edwin Koo's *Community Healthcare* series documenting the home visits conducted by community nurses and medical social workers, and the operations of eldercare centres during the circuit breaker, and How Hwee Young's series on the Singapore General Hospital's various functions. Presenting these images using a projection allows the relentless pace and far-reaching functions of the hospital to be shown most dynamically.

These presentations on healthcare dialogue spatially with the final story in the previous section on Bright Vision Hospital, a community hospital that was reorganised to become a facility for recovering COVID-19 patients. This series, also shot by How, presents a day in the life in the hospital, from the registration of newly arrived patients, to daily exercises, to the joyful scenes when nurses clap and cheer for those getting discharged.

### **New Ways of Living**

The following section, *New Ways of Living*, dives into the theme of how life in Singapore has changed, and how we have adapted in different



ways. The photo stories presented here offer a reflection of aspects of our present reality that have been shaped by the new norms of safe distancing, the use of masks, and greater frequency of sanitisation practices. At the same time, they also highlight the different strategies for dealing with the constraints and challenges of life during the pandemic, especially through the use of technology.

The section is anchored by two strongly visual stories: Brian Teo's *Mask Up* and How Hwee Young's *Spaces*. Both these series provide a striking survey of how different Singapore has looked since the onset of the pandemic: the former adopts a black-and-white street photography approach to show the rising dominance of the mask in

Edwin Koo's *GE2020* photograph of Workers' Party candidate Louis Chua giving a fist bump to a man in a coffeeshop as fellow candidate He Ting Ru looks on, 2 July 2020.

**New Ways of Living** was intended to be an interlude, a pause. Sandwiched between two dense anecdotal sections, the narrative slows. Snapshots of daily life illustrates the collective experience of a redefined mode of existence. Thus, we encounter our own altered realities.

**Vidya Murthy, Curator** —  
New Ways of Living



urban Singapore, and the latter a haunting depiction of a quietened cityscape, once bustling but now deserted and plastic-wrapped, during the circuit breaker.

These visual anchors set the scene for the rest of the stories, from Teo's series on schools' efforts as they reopened and on the tireless and often thankless work of Safe Distancing Ambassadors, to the *GE2020* series by Edwin Koo and Teo focusing on how candidates continued to establish connections with voters amidst restrictions for mass rallies and the need for physical distancing. For this last series, the normalisation of new rituals for greeting such as the fist bump, and the use of

technology, becomes most evident. At the heart of this section is an important display on how religious groups in Singapore adapted to various restrictions during the pandemic. This is presented with two series by Zakaria Zainal: *A Reclusive Ramadan*, which documents how the Muslim community in Singapore observed Ramadan, from families conducting their prayers at home to migrant workers doing so within the Singapore Expo's community care facility; and *Keeping the Faith*, which explores how different religious groups in Singapore adapted to the restrictions, particularly with the use of technology.



**TOP**  
Brian Teo's *GE2020* photograph of People's Action Party candidate Tan Chuan Jin holding a Facebook and Instagram Live session at the party's branch in Chai Chee, 3 July 2020.



**ABOVE**  
Zakaria Zainal's *A Reclusive Ramadan* and *Keeping the Faith* series, with the former mounted over a metallic mesh curtain conveying the meeting of tradition and modernity, and the latter presented in constant dialogue through a central circular table.

## Making Visible

While the start of the exhibition featured a dark setting, signifying the bleakness and uncertainty of the pandemic, the final section, Making Visible, with its white flooring, is much brighter. The intention for this section, as reflective of that for the entire exhibition, is to show how the pandemic has brought to light the stories of marginalised and vulnerable communities. This is conveyed at the beginning of the section with portraits from the different series featured, for visitors to meet the individuals ‘face to face’ before proceeding with the photo stories.

The stories here highlight the experiences of different communities: Edwin Koo’s *Foreign Worker Housing* documents the various forms of accommodation used for managing the outbreak among migrant workers, including the Singapore Expo, army camps and the cruise ship *SuperStar Gemini*, for recovering workers. These are presented on suspended lightboxes along with other features on vulnerable families by Koo, as well as How Hwee Young’s coverage of *Transit Point @ Margaret Drive*, a shelter for displaced families and individuals which expedited its opening to accommodate Malaysians stranded here after Malaysia’s own lockdown measures were implemented.

A key consideration by the curators in this section was to highlight stories of Singaporeans who stepped in to help, to conclude the exhibition on a positive and uplifting note. These included various community and ground-up efforts documented by Koo, and a photo story from Zakaria’s *Deliver* series on Zulkifli Atnawi, a retiree who offered his support to vulnerable neighbours when the circuit breaker started.

It is at this concluding section that visitors may view the short film *The Spaces Between Us* by Adar Ng and Dave Lim, after having caught glimpses through several peepholes in the earlier sections, and hearing



the film’s soundscapes, which intermingle organically with the ambient music soundtrack by local electronic musician The Analog Girl, another commission by the National Museum. The short film picks things up from the photography, offering no spoken narration but, through a carefully edited sequence of meticulously framed scenes, invites us to observe how everyday life during the pandemic plays out in Singapore, and to reflect further on where we are today. Importantly, the coverage in this film on migrant workers’ experiences and perspectives continues the conversation started with the photographs in the section.

### A Polyphonic Approach

The exhibition is also punctuated at several points by videos of conversations between the curators, photographers and the subjects themselves. These videos offer another layer to the exhibition by inserting the voices of those involved, and providing visitors with a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the photography process and the curation of the exhibition. In addition, a digital component of the exhibition is accessible through visitors’ mobile devices, featuring audio introductions by the photographers

How Hwee Young’s *Transit Point @ Margaret Drive* series suspended on lightboxes, against a background of portraits of some of the shelter’s residents.

**While curating this section, I sought to uncover the voices of vulnerable communities in Singapore, whose fears and uncertainties were exacerbated during the circuit breaker. Their stories are poignant, yet often hidden. Making Visible thus brings to light the plight and challenges of these individuals and families, which I hope will continue the conversations about the social issues and inequalities in our society.**

**Priscilla Chua, Senior Curator** —  
Making Visible



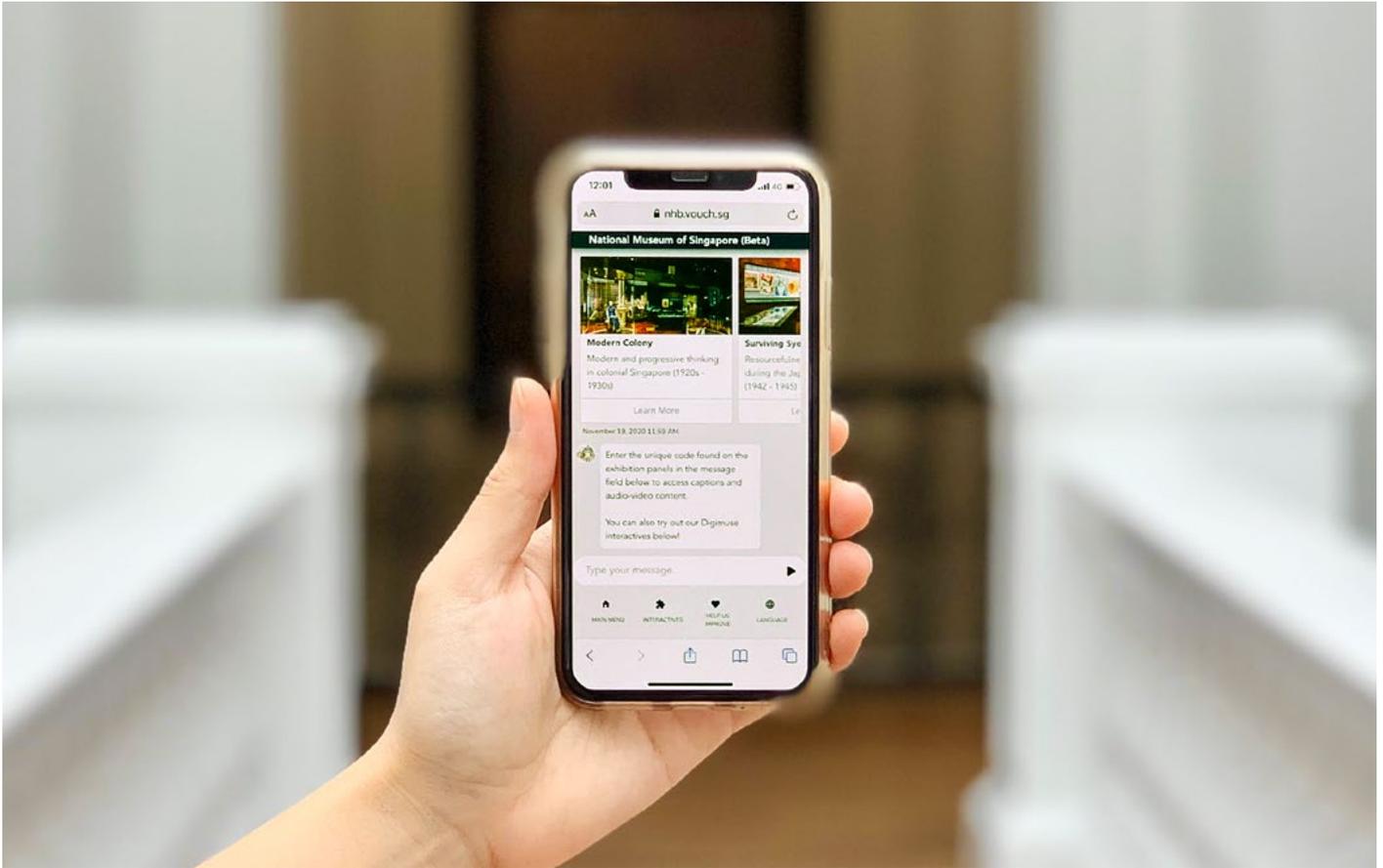
Photos from Zakaria Zainal's *Deliver* series on Zulkifli Atnawi's efforts in buying, packing and distributing groceries to needy families in his neighbourhood, 12–17 May 2020.



Going in, one of the biggest questions we asked ourselves was: How do we effectively use digital media to complement the physical experience of the exhibition? We really wanted to let the personal voices of the photographers, filmmakers and photo subjects shine through. These were captured in the video conversations with our curators as well as in audio clips, which add another layer of content for our visitors and are also a way of collecting the contemporary.

**Stephanie Yeo, Senior Editor, and Syafiqah Jaaffar, Assistant Curator** —  
on putting together the digital experience for the exhibition





The National Museum of Singapore's Dome Bot allows visitors to access supplementary text, video and audio content relating to the exhibitions.

## Forming New Connections: Digital Transformations

**The National Heritage Board ramped up its digitalisation efforts to offer up a diverse, vibrant array of digital programmes during the pandemic. Let's take a look at how the consumption of heritage has evolved, when going digital is no longer an option but an imperative.**

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the way many of us live and work, forcing us to adapt and make sacrifices in many areas. Within a few months, the heritage sector saw capacity cuts and the temporary closure of museums and heritage institutions, as well as a curtailing of tours and restrictions on many social, cultural and religious activities. At the National Heritage Board (NHB), it was a time of leading a response for the sector, and finding new ways to connect with the public by building on our existing digital transformation efforts.

Even before the pandemic hit, the heritage sector had acknowledged the need to reimagine how cultural content is delivered to audiences, who have a wealth of options online to spend their time on, and have come to expect well-crafted and easily accessible offerings. Recognising this, NHB mapped out a five-year digitalisation plan in 2019, which focused on co-creating personalised visitor experiences in the short term, and transforming NHB into an agile and data-driven organisation in the longer term.

NHB started with small-scale, experimental projects, such as 'digital twins' for museum exhibitions, immersive experiences using virtual and augmented reality technology, and 3D scans of artefacts which allowed the public to explore the museums' collections online. These efforts also extended to backend processes where data analytics is used to improve operations.

These rapidly implemented projects received support from staff and stakeholders, recalled Mohamed Hardi, Director, Information

The National Heritage Board's first online virtual exhibition, *An Old New World: Digital Edition*.

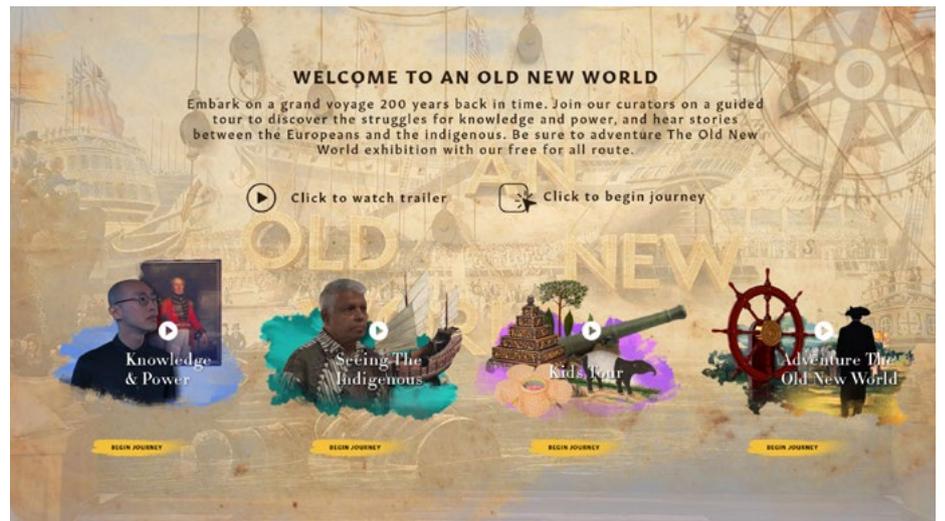


Technology and Chief Information Officer. “We identified opportunities for museums, in terms of the things we could do better, and looked at best practices from across the world. We started small and simple—with bite-size projects to try out, bring them to the table and show they can work before expanding. Once we knew that concepts like digital twins would work well, like they had overseas, it then allows us to utilise that same concept to expand, like with ticketing capabilities or the way we put our content up,” he said.

### Going Online: Digital Museums

The pandemic hastened the implementation of many initiatives and strategies of the digital plan. When physical, on-site visits that museums and heritage institutions depend on were halted because of safe management measures, NHB's institutions had to quickly find alternative ways of connecting with their audiences.

One way was to bring exhibitions online. The National Museum of Singapore's *An Old New World: Digital Edition* was launched as NHB's first online virtual exhibition, hosted on NHB's [Roots.gov.sg](http://Roots.gov.sg) website. The exhibition featured curator-led tours, and visitors could also explore 360-degree digital galleries, zoom in on artefacts and explore their stories at their leisure, from the comfort of their home.



“The websites of museums and heritage institutions were generally not equipped with suitable templates to showcase exhibitions online, and thankfully we had created exhibition templates a year before the pandemic hit,” said Norfaiz Noeryamin, Senior Manager (Digital), Strategic Communications and Digital. “Being a support division, we had to be involved in all the planning and discussions [to bring content online], and think of ways to reach out to netizens.”

Digital exhibitions also have the advantage of being publicly accessible for a longer time than their physical counterparts. “The best thing about digital is that it lives on. A lot of work and thought go into designing an exhibition and curating the artefacts. It's always a pity when everything gets lost [access-wise, when a show ends],” said Jervais Choo, Deputy Director, Organisational

“

We started small and simple—with bite-size projects to try out, bring them to the table and show they can work before expanding.

**Mohamed Hardi**  
Director, Information  
Technology, and  
Chief Information Officer

Design and Innovation, to *The Straits Times* in an article about arts and culture in the digital age.<sup>1</sup>

To help visitors navigate exhibitions and enable deeper dives into heritage content, digital concierge chatbots, such as the National Museum's Dome Bot, were implemented. These chatbots made it easier for visitors to access text, video and audio content, and even promoted games and other experiences. "Prior to the pandemic, we had plans to deploy chatbots progressively over the next two years to cover NHB museums and institutions. When COVID-19 set in, we had to deploy six chatbots over three months, as we sought new ways to respond to the limitations imposed by the 'new normal'," said Choo.

### Adapting Programmes

Most heritage programmes are in-depth, multisensory affairs designed to be experienced in

person, and are often also best experienced as a community, so taking them online posed a different set of challenges from those presented by digital exhibitions.

As the uncertainties of early 2020 gradually became the 'new normal', the organisers of the *Singapore HeritageFest (SHF)* were compelled to review their plans. The annual festival showcases the heritage of Singapore's places, institutions and people through carefully curated programmes. Originally scheduled for April 2020, *SHF* became the first large-scale NHB event to be affected by the pandemic, as safe distancing regulations and reduced operating capacities were progressively imposed from March. In early April, the government announced a nationwide circuit breaker, which halted most public activities.

The Festivals and Precinct Development team in NHB, which organises *SHF*, had been planning



A behind-the-scenes shot of Ana Fong (LEFT) from Tong Heng Delicacies and Suan Chong (RIGHT) from Chuan Ji Bakery sharing how traditional pastries and desserts are made in a live session broadcast on Facebook. This was a programme part of the fully digital *Singapore HeritageFest* held in 2020.



During the circuit breaker, physical guided tours had to be converted to digital programmes. One example was the *Hello Kallang* video documentary series, which features lesser-known stories of landmarks in Kallang.

for different scenarios since January. By March, however, the team had to make the hard call to take the festival entirely online. This would be the first time in SHF's 17-year history without physical events.<sup>2</sup> Much coordination with stakeholders lay ahead. The team had to figure out how best to translate SHF's most popular and relatable features, such as guided tours of usually inaccessible areas and the sharing of memories and experiences linked to heritage places, to the digital realm. "We had multiple ongoing conversations with partners and vendors, and plans had to change time and time again. At one point, we were rejigging plans on an almost daily basis," recalled David Chew, the festival's director.<sup>3</sup>

In June, *Singapore HeritageFest: Digital Edition* presented a slate of more than 80 online programmes, including live-streamed guided tours, podcasts, mini-series documentaries,

theatrical performances and culinary workshops. These were all available for free on the SHF website, and brought the added benefit of bypassing the capacity restrictions of physical programmes and boosting accessibility for everyone.

The digital platform also brought a different dimension to community participation. "Beyond providing online content, the bigger challenge [was] really how do you build a digital community? For us, that [meant] looking at how festival goers can connect with other festival goers in the digital sphere. The festival has always brought people together; it's brought like-minded heritage lovers together, and we [had] to continue this in the virtual sphere as well," said Chew in an interview with *Channel NewsAsia* about the festival.<sup>4</sup>

With the online format, new opportunities for promoting heritage

“

The festival has always brought people together; it's brought like-minded heritage lovers together, and we [had] to continue this in the virtual sphere as well.

**David Chew**

Festival Director,  
Singapore HeritageFest



Local musicians performing Hari Raya favourites as part of *Concert Together*—a digital programme under the *Ramadan Together* campaign, held in May 2020 celebrating the Muslim fasting month.

“

We're focusing more on democratising ownership of Singapore's heritage. Our social media content shifted from a one-way transmission of information to sparking conversations on heritage.

**Norfaiz Noeryamin**  
Senior Manager (Digital),  
Strategic Communications  
and Digital

conversations and encouraging collaborations emerged. “We’re focusing more on democratising ownership of Singapore’s heritage. Our social media content shifted from a one-way transmission of information to sparking conversations on heritage,” said Norfaiz.

The rich experience gained from organising the first fully digital *SHF* meant that the festival team was now better prepared to face changes to safety restrictions as the pandemic situation evolved. In May 2021, when COVID-19 measures were tightened again, the team gamely pivoted the physical activities planned for *SHF* to go online. Chew shared, “Learning from last year, we decided that most of the festival programming this year would be digital, and physical activities would have digital equivalents for audiences who would not sign up for the physical experience. This resulted in us being prepared to still roll out the digital equivalent of the physical programme once restrictions returned.”

### ***Ramadan Together***

Before the pandemic and the resulting restrictions on social gatherings, NHB had planned to showcase the intangible cultural heritage of Singapore’s Muslim community during the fasting month of Ramadan by documenting individual and family celebrations of the holy month, and the activities at the Geylang Ramadan bazaar and in mosques.

However, due to the circuit breaker, the bazaar was cancelled and mosques were unable to host mass activities such as *iftars*, where congregants gather to break their fast for the day. “As a Muslim, I was affected emotionally because we could not [gather as a group] to break fast or for prayers. Looking at the sentiments on social media, many Muslims in Singapore were [similarly] emotionally affected,” said Norfaiz.

“Knowing this, the team and my colleagues from the Heritage Research and Assessment division came up with a campaign that aimed to bring everyone together

online to celebrate Ramadan.” Held in May 2020, the *Ramadan Together* campaign connected more than 1,000 Muslims, along with non-Muslims, in live-streamed Zoom sessions for heartfelt conversations about community, faith and cultural heritage, ending off with virtual *iftars*.

Other highlights in the campaign included *Masak Together*, a live culinary demonstration of beloved Hari Raya dishes such as *roti jala* with chicken curry, and *Concert Together*, which featured local musicians performing Hari Raya favourites, both of which were broadcast on Facebook Live. “*Ramadan Together* pushed us to be unafraid of experimenting with different ways of engaging our audience,” said Norfaiz. “In this day and age of innovation, we should be driven to try new things, measure their impact and improve on them or pivot if necessary.”

### **Singapore’s Little Treasures**

For the Education and Community Outreach division, a priority was to come up with programmes that resonated with the young, given that many children and students were stuck indoors for much of the circuit breaker period. The division’s programmes during this time included a learning package for preschoolers consisting of short interactive videos based on the Asian Civilisations Museum’s and heritage institutions’ artefacts, as well as a mask design competition.

“During the circuit breaker, there was a lot of good digital content and activities that our museums and heritage institutions were offering to students. But there was not much for preschoolers,” said Joanne Chen, Senior Manager, Education and Community Outreach. “As a mother of two, I thought more could be done for them, and I got thinking about how we could repurpose existing training programmes for preschool teachers into activities that would be easy for preschoolers to do without supervision. This eventually led to the *Singapore’s Little Treasures* home-based learning packages, which were interactive and had audio clips to help children use them independently.”

### **Reaching Out to the Industry: Arts and Culture Resilience Package**

NHB’s response to the pandemic was boosted by the Digitalisation Fund, part of the S\$75 million Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP) announced in March 2020 by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. The fund supports NHB’s drive to improve access to Singapore’s heritage through digital means, as well as to seed new digital works and opportunities in the heritage industry. Projects that have already been announced include ‘digital twins’ of museum spaces and live-streaming of programmes from heritage institutions.

As part of *Masak Together*, a live culinary demonstration of making beloved Hari Raya dishes such as *roti jala* with chicken curry was broadcast on Facebook Live.





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We sought to achieve two things: find opportunities to create and sustain jobs for the sector, and to testbed and drive new digital product developments.

**Jervais Choo**

Deputy Director, Organisational Design and Innovation

“The ACRP provided us with the means to quickly reach out to freelancers, self-employed individuals, creative start-ups and businesses to create job opportunities and projects. We sought to achieve two things: find opportunities to create and sustain jobs for the sector, and to testbed and drive new digital product developments,” said Choo.

A major initiative that benefitted from ACRP was *DigiMuse Presents: Circuit Breaker Edition*, which showcased heritage-centric projects from local creative freelancers, companies and

individuals. Sourced through an open call, the projects included augmented-reality filters that allowed users to virtually try on jewellery from the Asian Civilisations Museum, role-playing games and puzzles inspired by heritage stories and artworks, an online escape room game, and more. “We were also able to deploy an entire range of new and innovative digital projects presented by the creative community, which gave us great insight into the creative potential of digital projects for the heritage and museum sector,” added Choo.

### **Digital and ‘Phygital’ Experiences: From the Pandemic to the Future**

The pandemic forced changes in how people interact with heritage and culture, but some of these shifts had already started before 2020. Many of the initiatives and strategies in the digital masterplan aimed to address these evolving trends, the key being to change the way NHB engaged people, and to always be versatile and adaptable.

A screenshot of the *Singapore’s Little Treasures* learning package for preschoolers. It consists of short interactive videos based on the Asian Civilisations Museum’s and heritage institutions’ artefacts.

The way forward may well be centred on a ‘phygital’ approach, combining the best of the physical and digital worlds, while always being focused on the people and stories at its core. “We still want visitors to physically visit us. Digital then becomes an interesting means by which we can layer on perspectives, a way to extend your visit. It’s not a replacement, and that’s an important connection that we were able to make,” said Choo.

As coronavirus waves continue to buffet countries around the world, we may have to live with the pandemic for some time yet. For NHB, the lessons and experiences of 2020 have shown the importance of maintaining connections and keeping people in touch through heritage, as well as staying nimble and adaptable through crises.

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Digital then becomes an interesting means by which we can layer on perspectives, a way to extend your visit. It’s not a replacement, and that’s an important connection that we were able to make.



One of the projects funded by the Arts and Culture Resilience Package was the National Museum of Singapore’s *Zoom into History*, a series of online conversations about selected museum objects, helmed by local actors and comedians.

#### NOTES

- 1 Toh Wen Li, “Covid-19 sparks questions about arts in the digital age,” *The Straits Times*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/covid-19-sparks-questions-about-arts-in-the-digital-age>
- 2 Ong Sor Fern, “Heritage fest goes digital,” *The Straits Times*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/heritage-fest-goes-digital>
- 3 Ong Sor Fern, “Singapore Heritage Festival goes fully digital with 80 free programmes including videos and podcasts,” *The Straits Times*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/singapore-heritage-festival-goes-fully-digital-with-80-free-programmes-including>
- 4 Nisha Abdul Rahim, “2020 Singapore Heritage Festival goes digital amid COVID-19,” *Channel NewsAsia*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/2020-singapore-heritage-festival-goes-digital-amid-covid-19-12837980>

Scan here to access the diverse digital offerings mentioned in the article from the comfort of your home!





## **Closing the Distance: The Work of *HeritageCares***

**The meaningful work of the *HeritageCares* team shines even brighter in these times of isolation as they continue engaging vulnerable groups.**

It has been said that heritage and culture are the heart and soul of a nation, and that they belong to everyone.<sup>1</sup> However, cultural institutions such as museums have tended to be spaces where access by vulnerable groups is limited.<sup>2</sup> Such vulnerable groups may include persons with disabilities, seniors, at-risk youths, and children of families in difficulty. Acknowledging this inequality in access, the National Heritage Board (NHB) has actively sought to ensure that its museums and heritage institutions are easily accessible and inclusive for all.

In 2018, NHB launched its first heritage masterplan, *Our SG Heritage Plan*, with engaging underserved communities as one of its objectives. The plan put the issue of access and inclusivity in Singapore's national cultural institutions at the forefront of public discourse. The following year, NHB conducted an accessibility audit of its institutions to identify universal design solutions and assistive technologies for people with different needs, in order to create welcoming, conducive spaces for them. One of the results of the audit was the National Museum of Singapore's Quiet

Room—a safe space for visitors who might experience sensory overload and/or social overstimulation, particularly children with autism.<sup>3</sup>

A key pillar that complements the physical infrastructural improvements is *HeritageCares*, a philanthropic initiative under NHB's Education and Community Outreach division. Established in 2016, *HeritageCares* reaches out to underserved segments of society with meaningful heritage-related programmes. Starting out with beneficiaries of Community Chest—



**LEFT**  
Seniors from SilverACE Bukit Merah, a senior activity centre, walking down memory lane while viewing old stamps.



**RIGHT**  
Children listening intently during an online storytelling session presented by *HeritageCares@Home* in collaboration with the Tamil Language Council in January 2021.

Photo courtesy of Morning Star Community Services



the fundraising and engagement arm of the National Council of Social Services—*HeritageCares* now extends its programmes to other social service agencies. *HeritageCares* focuses on four target groups: families in difficulty; at-risk youth; seniors; and people with disabilities and/or special needs.

*HeritageCares'* participatory programmes aim to encourage family bonding, enhance social skills, provide quality educational experiences, and promote active ageing. Some examples include parent-child craft sessions, guided tours at museums, and heritage trails, all sensitively tailored to the different needs and abilities of participants. Some of the social service agencies whose beneficiaries have participated in *HeritageCares* programmes are the Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura Student Care Centres, Movement

for the Intellectually Disabled Singapore (MINDS) and the Asian Women's Welfare Association. To help volunteers and docents gain a better understanding of differently abled visitors, *HeritageCares* also works with organisations such as MINDS and the Cerebral Palsy Alliance School to conduct training sessions for them.

#### **Facing the Pandemic: *HeritageCares@Home***

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and Singapore entered the circuit breaker in March 2020, all arts and cultural venues were closed, and the usual activities organised by *HeritageCares* could no longer take place. Even as the economy gradually reopened, the pandemic restrictions meant that programmes like those organised by *HeritageCares* had to be remoulded

to abide by safety guidelines. The world had undergone a sea change, and in this new climate of deep uncertainties, the universal need for mutual care and social interaction felt stronger than ever. Particularly for vulnerable groups, it was crucial that they continued to participate in activities in order to receive some measure of comfort and support during this time of enforced physical isolation.

With that in mind, the *HeritageCares* team began to pivot to digital means to stay connected with its partners and continue engaging beneficiaries. *HeritageCares@Home* was thus born. "During the initial stage of conceptualising the online programmes, the team worked together over many days, weeks even, to brainstorm engaging and meaningful activities. It really is an achievement for the team when

Children immersed in the *Create Your Own Tok Panjang* craft activity where they made a paper cut-out version of the traditional Peranakan feast. Facilitators guided the children via video-conferencing.

Photo courtesy of Supertalent Student Care Centre



we see smiles on the faces of the beneficiaries,” said Josephine Sin, Senior Manager, *HeritageCares*.

The team marshalled the advantages of digital technologies such as video-conferencing software, while at the same time carefully arranging on-the-ground logistics like the distribution of workshop materials. Since its launch in March 2020, *HeritageCares@Home* has conducted over 130 online programmes, providing light-hearted yet meaningful stimulation to uplift the communities it serves.

### **Uplifting Communities**

Instead of bussing children to the museums, heritage institutions and historic sites during the school holidays, *HeritageCares* now organises remote craft workshops for them. Materials for the workshop are delivered to their schools or care centres, and the entire workshop is conducted via video conferencing, led by facilitators or instructors.

Among the beneficiaries were primary school children from the Morning Star Community Services after-school care centre. They were treated to a clay art-making workshop where they created

miniature ice-cream and waffle clay models, guided by an instructor.

A popular programme among seniors is *Virtual Return to the Tea Dance*, where they perform light aerobic exercise to evergreens by beloved icons like the Beatles and Teresa Teng. This programme used to be held at nursing homes or senior activity centres; with the pandemic outbreak, however, the sessions are now conducted online, with a safe distance between participants while the facilitators are beamed onto a screen.

Another favourite for seniors, *Hey Ocarina!*, involves participants learning to play a tune on an ocarina that they have decorated. “It’s good for the elderly to learn new instruments that they deem interesting, and they will be proud of themselves if they manage to learn! Even if they can’t, they are able to take it as an opportunity to interact with other residents, which can help uplift their mood and well-being,” said Angel Tan, Programme Coordinator, Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore), one of the beneficiaries of the programme.

Certainly, the qualitative benefits that each participant reaps are central to the work of *HeritageCares*; these range from much-needed human interaction,

“

It’s good for the elderly to learn new instruments that they deem interesting, and they will be proud of themselves if they manage to learn! Even if they can’t, they are able to take it as an opportunity to interact with other residents, which can help uplift their mood and well-being.

**Angel Tan**

Programme Coordinator,  
Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore)

“

Our largest challenge was keeping the progress of the online session on the same level of interactivity as a physical one. The next would be, and still is, how do we reach into the homes of those who do not have the necessary technical support or knowledge to navigate tech tools themselves?

**Sim En Qi**

Assistant Manager, *HeritageCares*

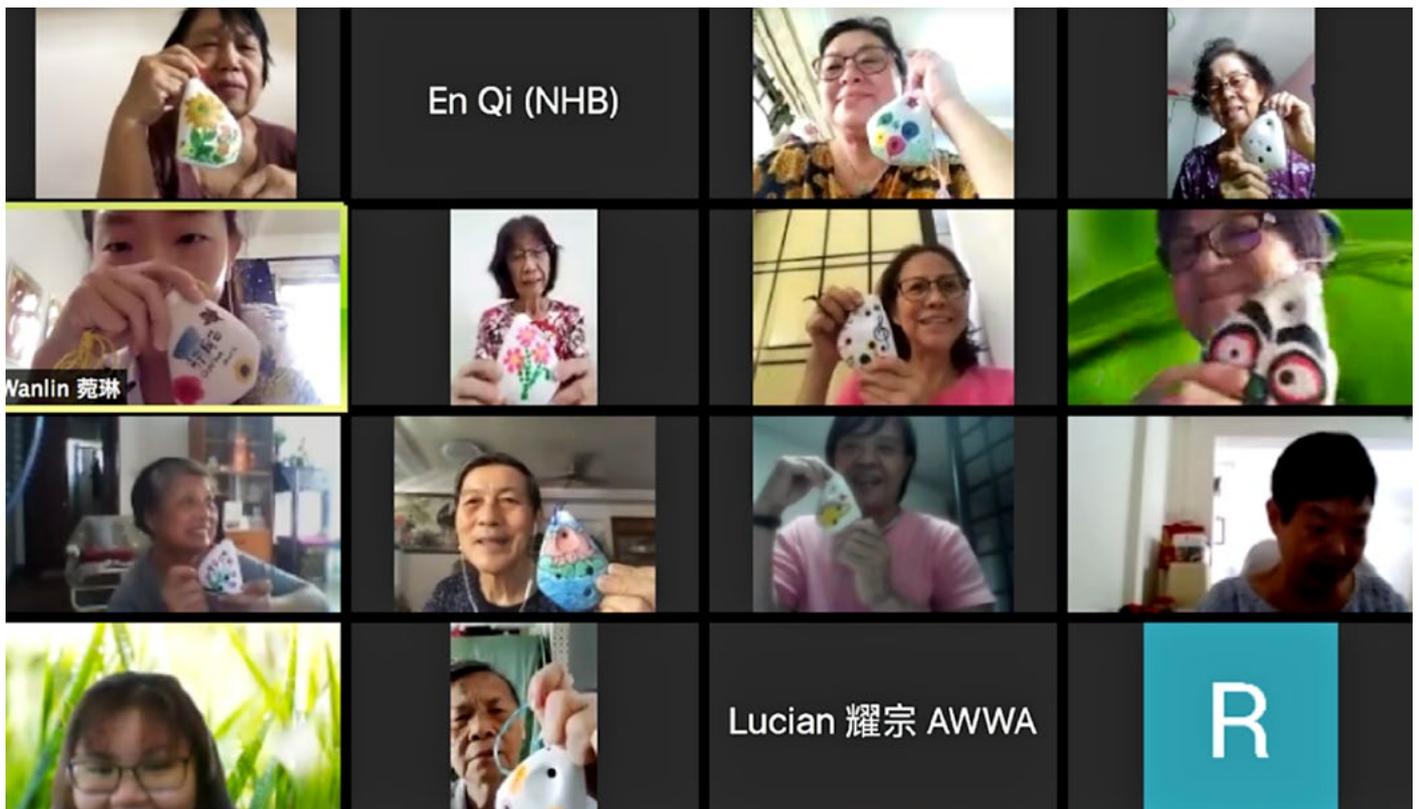
the stimulating process of learning, to an improved mental wellbeing.

### Preparing for the Future

The switch from highly interactive on-site offerings to online programmes was not easy, and the *HeritageCares* team faced their fair share of challenges. From mastering the use of video-conferencing software to tackling tech issues and moving administrative processes online, the team has gamely navigated the transition to the digital sphere.

So far, response to the virtual programmes has been overwhelmingly positive. However, some hurdles

have yet to be crossed, as Sim En Qi, Assistant Manager, *HeritageCares*, reflected: “Our largest challenge was keeping the progress of the online session on the same level of interactivity as a physical one. The next would be, and still is, how do we reach into the homes of those who do not have the necessary technical support or knowledge to navigate tech tools themselves?” Thus, the work continues for *HeritageCares* as NHB aims to leave no one behind, even in the face of a pandemic.



Participants of *Hey Ocarina!* proudly showing the ocarina that they have personally decorated. Now conducted online, this ocarina workshop caters mainly to seniors, who learn to play a tune on the instrument.

Photo courtesy of Asian Women's Welfare Association

### NOTES

- 1 National Heritage Board, *Renaissance City Plan III: Heritage Development Plan* (Author, Singapore: 2008); National Heritage Board, “Making our museums and heritage institutions more accessible and inclusive,” 2018, Committee of Supply announcements, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/who-we-are/media-centre/committee-of-supplyannouncements/2020/2018>
- 2 Dario Scarpati, “The democratic museum—accessibility as a stimulus for social inclusion,” *Proceedings of the COME-IN!-Thematic Conferences* (Jörn Berding and Matthias Gather, eds.), 2018.
- 3 Besides this, the Indian Heritage Centre also customised their gallery seats with handles and backrest to make the space more accessible for the elderly, while the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall enhanced their facilities to ensure that their galleries and showcases are wheelchair-accessible.

# A Communal Affair: Hawker Culture's Road to UNESCO Inscription

The inscription of local hawker culture on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage would not have been possible without the participation of all segments of society—a testament to the power of collaboration and consultation.

Text by John Teo, Deputy Director (Research),  
Heritage Research & Assessment, and  
Bernadette Yew, Senior Assistant Director,  
Heritage Research & Assessment



In Singapore, hawker food is sustenance and craft, social and democratic all at the same time, melding diverse culinary and cultural histories to become an integral facet of our identity. As the 'community dining rooms' that hawker centres represent, we all participate and share in hawker culture.

After Singapore's ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2018, the National Heritage Board (NHB) embarked on a series of public consultations to determine an aspect of our heritage that would stand as

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognises food heritage as an important aspect of intangible cultural heritage. As of January 2021, there are 22 food- and drink-related traditions from 32 countries as part of UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, from the art of Neapolitan ‘Pizzaiuolo’ in Italy, to ‘Hawker culture in Singapore, community dining and culinary practices in a multicultural urban context’, which was inscribed on 16 December 2020.



#### FROM TOP

A travelling exhibition was held as part of the nomination campaign to garner support from the public for the inscription of hawker culture on UNESCO’s list of intangible cultural heritage.

Members of the public looking at a diorama of a typical hawker centre, which was displayed as part of the travelling exhibition.

A member of public contributing a message of support for the nomination campaign.

the nation’s first nomination to the UNESCO Representative List of ICH of Humanity. In these discussions, stakeholders of all stripes—from members of the public to practitioners, academics and policymakers—unanimously agreed on one point: Hawker culture is a fundamental part of Singapore’s identity.

With the decision made to nominate hawker culture for inscription, the National Environment Agency, NHB and the Federation of Merchants’ Associations, Singapore worked towards a joint submission to UNESCO. Two years later, at the 15th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Paris, hawker culture was confirmed as Singapore’s first inscription on the ICH list.

The inscription was the culmination of an extensive process of consultation and collaboration across society. Bringing together hawkers and trade groups, the community at large and government agencies, the nomination campaign is a testament to the dedication of all who keep hawker culture alive. This collaborative approach—convening groups with different perspectives and interests—was essential to the successful inscription of hawker culture as an ICH, and will continue to be central in efforts to sustain this living heritage.

#### All Hands on Deck

When it came to planning for the nomination campaign, the foremost priority was to ensure the inclusion of many voices and perspectives, in particular those of hawkers, along with their involvement and support. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it at the time of the inscription: “The biggest thanks must go to the generations of hawkers for nourishing a nation’s stomach and spirits. This recognition would not have come without their sweat, toil and dedication to their profession.”<sup>1</sup>

A nationwide campaign was germinated, which included numerous public engagements, from focus group discussions and consultations with hawkers, academics and youths, to an islandwide travelling exhibition that reached out to the masses. A successful social media campaign was also launched on Instagram. The hashtags, #OurHawkerCulture and subsequently #ThankYouHawkers, invited Singaporeans to express support for the nomination and to thank hawkers by submitting personal stories and photographs of their experiences with hawker culture.

Across the various platforms, both physical and digital, more than 880,000 pledges and messages of support were garnered. Representative

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**• Feb 2018**

Singapore ratifies the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

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**• Apr 2018**

National Heritage Board co-creates an ICH inventory with Singaporeans.

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**• Aug 2018**

Announcement of intention to nominate Singapore's hawker culture for the UNESCO Representative List of ICH of Humanity.

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**• Mar 2019**

Submission of nomination documents to UNESCO for evaluation and decision on the inscription.

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**• Mar 2019–Nov 2020**

Evaluation by UNESCO. Public engagement continues.

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**• 16 Nov 2020**

Recommended for inscription by the Evaluation Body.

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**• 16 Dec 2020**

Inscription of Singapore's hawker culture on UNESCO's Representative List of ICH of Humanity.

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groups including hawkers' associations, schools, community groups and private organisations from a range of sectors also collectively contributed more than 200 letters of support. These messages and letters were included in the joint submission and proved pivotal to the successful nomination, as they helped provide a holistic picture of hawker culture and its relevance and significance to Singaporeans, as well as the connections fostered among diverse groups.

Individuals, the private sector and community groups also stepped forward with their unique takes on hawker culture, working on projects that helped raise public awareness of its diverse traditions and many contributions to the economic, social and cultural evolution of Singapore as a nation.

One such project was Google Maps' digital documentation of hawker centres across the island, a collaboration between Google, NHB, the National Environment Agency and the Federation of Merchants' Associations. Harnessing technology and Singapore's love for hawker food, the project digitally reconstructs hawker centres on Google Maps' Street View function using immersive 360-degree imagery. Information on the stalls and their offerings are also included, giving greater visibility to the wide-ranging and distinctive fare of each hawker centre.

Young people in Singapore also demonstrated their appreciation in creative ways. Students from Ngee Ann Polytechnic produced documentaries, short videos and podcasts about the daily lives of hawkers. The nomination campaign similarly inspired Tew Gun Rui, then an 11-year-old student, to create a card game called Chope.Buy.Eat that showcases the varied, multicultural spread of our hawker dishes.

**What Lies Ahead**

Though a milestone in celebrating our hawker culture, the successful inscription on the ICH list does not mean the work is finished. To safeguard this invaluable heritage and keep it alive, partnerships between government agencies, hawkers, training institutions, community organisations, academia, nongovernmental organisations and individuals will be crucial. Ensuring the continued vitality and social relevance of hawker culture rests on four pillars: transmission; research and documentation; support; and promotion.

Working through the lens of heritage, NHB's contributions are centred on the pillars of research and documentation as well as promotion. These initiatives include collaboration with other agencies to create commemorative philatelic items, webinars and discussions of hawker culture, and a photography series. The last features the architecture and iconic design of hawker centres, the latter being key in establishing hawker centres as inclusive shared spaces, as the communal dining rooms of Singapore.


**RIGHT**

Google Maps' digital documentation of hawker centres reconstructs hawker centres on Google Maps' Street View using immersive 360-degree imagery.





**As part of the nomination campaign, a travelling exhibition was held islandwide, garnering over 200 messages of support. Here are some of them.**

*“Growing up, [the hawker centre] was an outlet to meet the thousands of neighbours from the apartments around us. It was often a pleasant feeling to be able to share tables with strangers when the place was crowded, and possibly strike up a conversation over a hearty meal.”*

—**Klinsen**

*“[Hawker centres are an] indispensable part of Singapore’s unique culture and rich heritage, where delicious food is born, fond memories are shared and strong ties are forged.”*

—**Nicholas Wong**

*“Hawker culture is an endearing part of what makes up Singapore. It brings us the comforting feeling of home despite the heat, and is an indulgence we have access to no matter which part of Singapore we’re in. It is what many of us have grown up with and I am so grateful to the hawkers who spend many hours in the heat frying, cooking, boiling and serving us wonderful food. As a Singaporean, it is my pride and honour to have such a vibrant hawker culture in our country.”*

—**Chloe Fu**



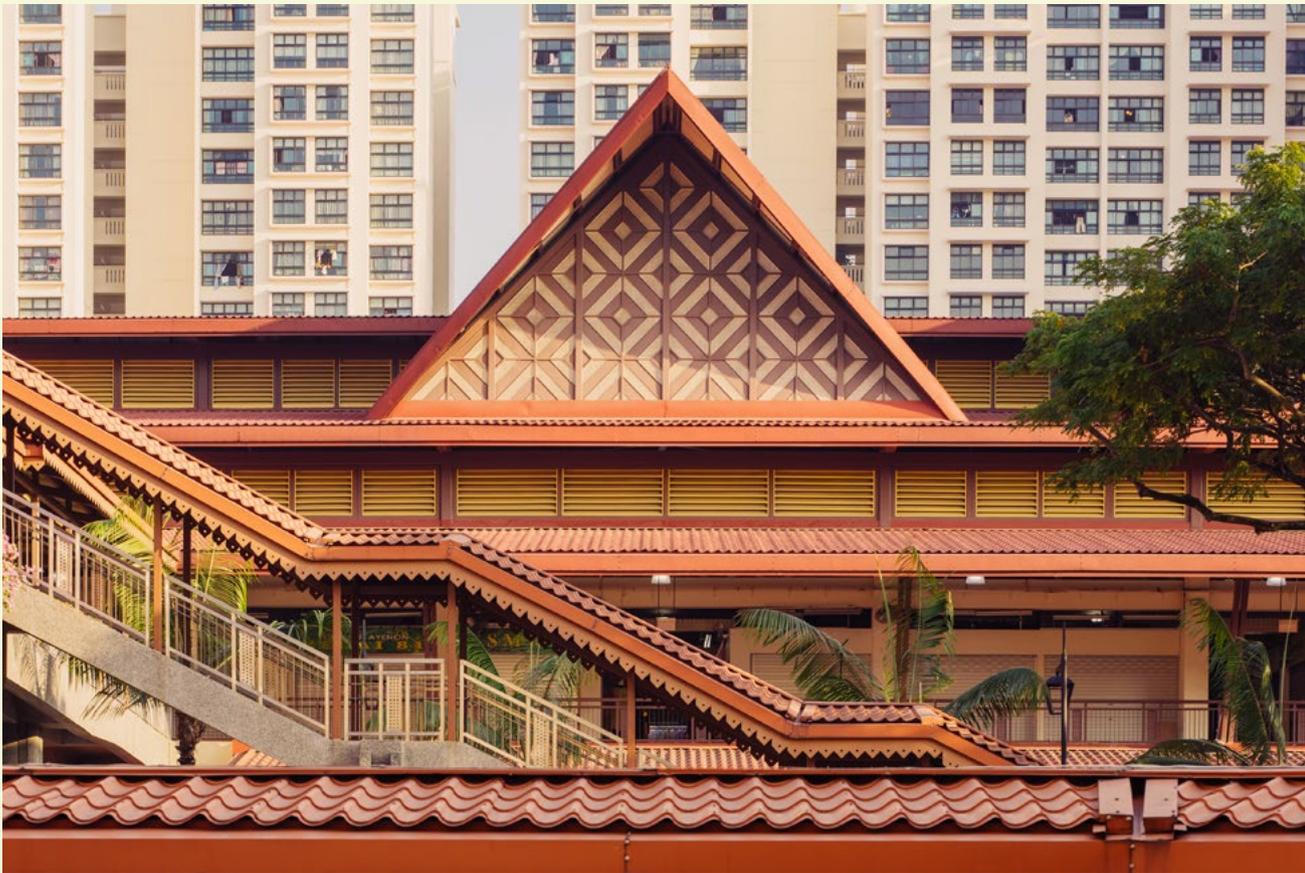
**NOTE**

- 1 Chew Hui Min, “Singapore hawker culture listed as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage,” *Channel NewsAsia*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-hawker-culture-unesco-intangible-cultural-heritage-13784522>

A photography series, *Our Hawker Culture: Built for Great Taste*, was commissioned by the National Heritage Board, showcasing 12 selected hawker centres. Through the lenses of local photographers, the series demonstrates how design has played a significant role in the renewed spaces we see today, while retaining iconic cultural features and addressing inclusivity.



01



02

- 01 East Coast Lagoon Hawker Centre (photo by Fabian Ong)
- 02 Geylang Serai Market (photo by Khoo Guo Jie)
- 03 Tekka Market (photo by Rebecca Toh)
- 04 Tampines Round Market and Food Centre (photo by Rebecca Toh)

All photos courtesy of the respective photographers





03

04



Explore the unique architecture of our hawker centres through the eyes of local photographers. Scan here to view the full series of photographs!



## Preserving Our Hawker Culture: Research and Documentation

Research and documentation are a key pillar of safeguarding hawker culture. Over the years, academics, local food advocates and individuals have embarked on research and documentation efforts in the hopes that future generations will have access to information about the manifold roots and traditions as well as the evolution of hawker culture.

Since its inception in 2015, the National Heritage Board's Heritage Research Grant has supported four projects on hawker culture or food heritage. Such research—often in collaboration with community groups, nongovernmental organisations and educational institutions—is the foundation for efforts in promoting and sustaining our food culture.

We speak to Dr Vivienne Wee and Sarah Huang Benjamin of research and consultancy firm Ethnographica about their project, *The Evolution of Singapore's Hawker Culture: Street Food and Changing Landscapes*, funded by the Heritage Research Grant.

### Tell us more about yourselves and your research interests.

**[Vivienne]** As an anthropologist, I focus on ethnographic interviews with practitioners of cultural heritage, including food heritage. Through such interviews, I learn how they view heritage as practitioners of traditions. Their perspectives as practitioners are very important for heritage to be sustained as living traditions continuing from past and present to the future.

**[Sarah]** My academic background is in sociology but I've worked in food and media for the past few years, and so the opportunity to research and document our hawker culture is very exciting. I'm inspired by the mix of cultures that go into our local cuisine. To be able to delve deep into this aspect of Singapore is very gratifying.

### What was your research on hawker culture about, and what were some of the challenges during the research?

**[Vivienne and Sarah]** In this project, we locate Singapore's hawker culture in time and place. We explore how historic hawker stalls capture tastes of the past. This is particularly significant in view of the rapid, large-scale changes of Singapore's landscape in the last two centuries, especially since 1965. We analyse how Singapore's hawker culture pertains to a larger ecosystem of time, place and food, which enables people to relate meaningfully to continuities from past to present. Taking this more holistic approach, we understand Singapore's hawker culture as a phenomenon of cultural synaesthesia, not just as food dishes, which embodies social memories of changing landscapes as well as personal histories of lived experiences.

In this project, we study 42 stalls [spread across] 23 hawker centres. Eleven of these 23 hawker centres have disappeared. Yet, people remember these places, especially the hawker stalls they used to frequent. The hawker stalls from these bygone places evoke social memories of the former hawker centres and personal histories of eating from these stalls when the former hawker centres existed. Twelve of the hawker centres still exist. However, the landscape surrounding these hawker centres has changed.



Dr Vivienne Wee (ABOVE) and Sarah Huang Benjamin (RIGHT)

Photos courtesy of Vivienne Wee and Sarah Huang Benjamin



Hawker stalls at these surviving hawker centres evoke social memories of past landscapes within and outside the hawker centres, as well as personal histories of lived experiences in these changing landscapes. In this way, we study how people's appreciation of historic hawker stalls derives not just from the taste of the food, but also from their social memories and personal histories. In that sense, hawker culture is more than just hawker food: It encompasses the cultural ambience that gives meaning to the food.

**What are your thoughts on the recent listing of Singapore's hawker culture on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and its impact on the future of Singapore's hawker culture?**

**[Vivienne and Sara]** It was exciting that Singapore's hawker culture was successfully inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List, as it confirms what we as Singaporeans have always known—that our hawker culture is special and something to be celebrated, preserved and further developed. While Singaporeans rely on hawkers for several meals a day, the UNESCO inscription reminds us that hawker culture is more than just hawker food, more than just sustenance.

Singapore's hawkers engage in artisanal traditions every day when they cook and offer their food. Much like Japanese craftsmen who specialise in making a certain type of knife for decades, Singapore's hawkers have honed their craft, cooking a specific dish, not because it's easy or necessarily very profitable, but because it's part of their traditions and our heritage as a nation.

Much like the restaurant industry, hawkers in Singapore are engaging in the pursuit of culinary excellence. So, we hope that the recognition by UNESCO and the international community will highlight this artisanal aspect of hawker culture, attracting younger people to the trade. We also hope that the conversation around the inscription will give hawkers a voice to air their concerns and worries, allowing us to help them preserve this important culture.



## Crafting New Horizons: ACM & Partnerships

The recent shift of the Asian Civilisations Museum's curatorial philosophy towards collaboration and partnership opens up hidden potentials.

Text by **Ian Liu**  
Assistant Director (Digital,  
Marketing and Corporate  
Communications)



### ABOVE

The Fashion and Textiles gallery's first display, *Fashion Revolution: Chinese Dress from Late Qing to 1976*, which features highlights from the Chinese textiles collection of Chris Hall. The gallery presents a diverse range of fashions and textiles through annual changing displays, showing how identities and cross-cultural exchanges are revealed through dress.

Opened in 1997, the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) is Singapore's premier institution showcasing Asian antiquities and decorative art. Continuing its foray into the world of fashion after the highly successful 2019 exhibition, *Guo Pei: Chinese Art and Couture*, ACM has recently unveiled its new materials- and design-themed permanent galleries that house some of the most visually captivating pieces in the ACM collection. These developments have established ACM's position as one of the leading museums that explore Asia in global fashion history, emphasising the exchanges between Asia and the world, from the perspective of Asia.

While ACM continues to challenge visitors to rethink what heritage, tradition and identity mean in the present day, it has also sought novel means of presenting its rich collection. A recent shift in its curatorial philosophy sees ACM moving towards a model of co-creation by partnering other institutions or individuals

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These developments have established ACM's position as one of the leading museums that explore Asia in global fashion history, emphasising the exchanges between Asia and the world, from the perspective of Asia.

to showcase traditional artefacts through new, inspiring ways. In this spirit of innovation, ACM has embarked on its first-ever tripartite partnership—bringing together the museum, fashion industry leaders as well as fashion educators and students—to present special exhibitions delving into niche topics that augment its permanent galleries.

The permanent galleries continue to provide visitors with a better understanding of Asian design, material culture and markers of identity. The Fashion and Textiles gallery, in particular, serves as a platform for two present focuses of ACM: to develop fashion as a subject of collection and display, and to present innovations in tradition through contemporary pieces.

ACM has chosen to develop partnerships for this gallery as it strongly believes in the power of fashion and textiles in articulating a community's culture, while at the same time illustrating the cross-cultural exchanges that define the Asian identity. The partnership projects aim to open up new interpretations and encounters that will galvanise the industry, rally communities and create new museum experiences.

Beyond supporting the Asian imagination, craft, tradition and discourse, the museum also acts as a bridge between the traditional and the contemporary to foster new ways of seeing. As it evolves from an entity rooted in traditional museum curatorial practices to one that actively explores alternative ways of working, ACM ensures its continued relevance in a fast-changing sector. And, if these partnership projects are indicative of ACM's outlook, the museum's future certainly looks to be an open, collaborative and exciting one!

#### LASALLE × ACM × TaFF

#SGFASHIONNOW is an exhibition of firsts. It is ACM's first display of contemporary Singaporean fashion, exploring designs and concepts reflective of local fashion and Asian heritage today. It is also ACM's first community exhibition where the curation and exhibition design were wholly decided by five Year 3 students from LASALLE College of the Arts' BA (Hons) Fashion Media and Industries programme as part of their Graduation Project module. In addition, it is the first platform where the museum, school and industry (Textiles and Fashion Federation, or TaFF) co-created such a showcase of Singapore fashion.

The five Year 3 LASALLE students were selected by ACM as the winning team for their exhibition and curatorial proposal. They had been asked to pick works by four local fashion designers that complement another four chosen by ACM—the latter including the winner of TaFF's Singapore Stories competition (see sidebar on page 34)—and craft a compelling narrative around the works.

ACM offered the student group a range of museum expertise and accompanying resources—including interviews with the selected fashion designers as well as opportunities to develop their

#SGFASHIONNOW is the Asian Civilisations Museum's first display of contemporary local fashion. Significantly, it was co-created by the museum, students from LASALLE College of the Arts, and the Textiles and Fashion Federation.



## TaFF's Singapore Stories

Singapore's national fashion design competition, Singapore Stories, is a platform for designers to explore what it means to create a Singapore-inspired capsule collection in fashion apparel. The competition is an initiative by the Textile and Fashion Federation (TaFF), a non-profit trade association.

ACM's collection was used as an inspiration for the participants in terms of Asian design and imagination. The partnership between TaFF and ACM was grounded in the belief that the museum's collection is one of the most beautiful in Singapore and the region. Besides having ACM's director Kennie Ting as part of the panel of judges for the competition, both the director and a curator also provided mentoring and creative engagements with the contestants. In addition, participants were offered the rare opportunity to access the museum's full collection at the National Heritage Board's Heritage Conservation Centre.

The winning work is featured alongside other designers' pieces in the special exhibition, #SGFASHIONNOW, while the semifinalists' works are displayed at the lobby of ACM.



The semifinalists' works for the fashion design competition, Singapore Stories, are displayed at the lobby of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

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ACM has chosen to develop partnerships for this gallery as it strongly believes in the power of fashion and textiles in articulating a community's culture, while at the same time illustrating the cross-cultural exchanges that define the Asian identity.

curatorial vision, lead the design and installation of the show, present a talk and propose programmes in conjunction with the exhibition.

#SGFASHIONNOW aims to provoke contemplation on the question, 'What is Singapore fashion?', by highlighting the diverse approaches of selected designers whose works draw from the rich heritage of fashion and craft in Singapore. Backgrounded by the new permanent galleries and ACM's collection, the exhibition exemplifies the possibilities of a museum that continually innovates to forge invigorating encounters with its collection.

### Inter-Religious Organisation \* ACM

ACM is one of a few museums in the world where sacred art from multiple faiths is presented in galleries adjacent to each other, reflecting Singapore's multireligious character. These showcases of sacred art articulate the common human pursuit of excellence and the ideal of beauty in the representation of the divine, regardless of one's faith. In addition,

ACM aims to be a safe and inclusive space for faith and inter-faith dialogue—an endeavour that bears extra significance in today's world that is deeply fractured by conflict and polarisation.

To this end, ACM has partnered the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore (IRO), a nongovernmental organisation that promotes religious harmony, to engage the public in faith-related dialogue, using ACM's collection of sacred art as a point of departure. The project kicked off with the community exhibition, *Faith Beauty Love Hope—Our Stories, Your ACM*, which features a series of videos in which IRO members share their personal experiences, ideals and stories of religious identity based on their interpretations of the sacred art displayed in the galleries.

ACM also conducts guided tours of its sacred art collection for IRO members and participants, with the aim of bridging different cultures. The tours culminate in a discussion where visitors share their personal responses and stories inspired by the tour.

“

ACM aims to be a safe and inclusive space for faith and inter-faith dialogue—an endeavour that bears extra significance in today’s world that is deeply fractured by conflict and polarisation.

Through the space and platform afforded by ACM with this partnership, IRO is able to elevate and extend the impact of its message within communities, the younger generations and the public.

**Mandarin Guides \*  
Lianhe Zaobao \* ACM**

In 2018, ACM’s Mandarin Guides approached the museum with a proposal to bring the best of the museum to mandarin-speaking audiences. They suggested featuring a selection of objects from the ACM collection in fortnightly columns published in the Chinese newspaper, *Lianhe Zaobao*. The aim was to allow readers to experience the museum from the comfort of their homes, to inspire them to visit the museum and, of course, to attract them to join a Mandarin guided tour at ACM.

Leveraging the connections of the Mandarin Guides, with this partnership, ACM was able to expand its reach, promoting its collection to the masses. After securing interest from the newspaper, the Mandarin Guides began penning the articles. The articles were well received, and the partnership lasted two years. By the end of the series in early 2020, some 50 articles featuring objects from ACM had been published in *Lianhe Zaobao*.

The fruitful partnership has also led to a book in the making: The Mandarin Guides, *Lianhe Zaobao* and ACM are currently collaborating to co-publish a book highlighting 100 objects from ACM’s collection.

An article written by the Mandarin Guides for a fortnightly column published in the Chinese daily, *Lianhe Zaobao*. The column features artefacts from the Asian Civilisations Museum’s galleries. Pictured here is a mounted incense burner made in the 18th century.



**ABOVE**  
Guests of the Inter-Religious Organisation participating in a guided tour of sacred art at the Asian Civilisations Museum. The object shown here is *Bird Calligram* by Yusuf Chen Jinhui (1938–2008), a Chinese Muslim calligrapher.

**奢华的瑰宝**  
文图 | 新加坡亚洲文明博物馆中文导览组

看到“三合一”这个词，必然会联想到香喷喷的烤鸭。这菜，我们介绍的“三合一”，它没有鸭腿香，却有鸭腿嫩滑，熏出迷人的香气。

这香喷喷的“三合一”指的难道是那个“所有鸟脚上的香熏炉”？第一眼看上去，它好像是由欧洲工匠精心打磨而成。但细看之下，却又浑然一体。一只翠翠黑黑的漆面时隐时现，神似从欧洲雕漆中一开刃被仿制的香熏炉上，挂着一根细长的法想将这匹珍贵的马，需要骑去驮香炉。

法国工匠以精湛巧手将香炉设计成一只日本的小巧瓷雕林立在马背上，而马背上有一个带着翅膀的香炉，让香炉可以随风升起，好的还加有香炉的半圈儿。这是中国工匠精湛的鼻祖，但到了18世纪，日本的漆器产品已经大量出口欧洲。至于在雕刻上是当时欧洲上层社会常用于宴会餐桌上的装饰。这是自18世纪以来的经典组合，十分符合当时的奢侈时尚风。

这在17、18世纪的巴洛克和洛可可风格，最能体现到雕刻上。当时的意大利人便经常能在意大利的品、服饰、建筑等方面炫耀其财富。而这件香熏炉与马的结合，就体现了雕刻家们立体的作品。

那件香熏炉被赋予了巴洛克风格、奢华和极具装饰性的特征。而这件香熏炉以其独特的材料和精湛的雕刻工艺，展现出那个时代的巧匠天马行空的创意。

**小知识**  
香熏炉 (Incense burner)：香熏炉可追溯到10世纪的中国。相较于早期的巴洛克，其可反映出当时社会繁荣、奢侈，以及宗教文化的盛行。除此之外，也可作为艺术家对当时外来文化的喜爱，在创作中融入不少欧洲风格的特点。

■ 此文物属于亚洲文明博物馆世界展厅。  
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# Co-Creating with the Community: *IHC's Sikhs in Singapore— A Story Untold*

Text by **Malvika Agarwal**  
Curator, Indian Heritage Centre

The Indian Heritage Centre shows us the rich, meaningful possibilities in curating an exhibition when they adopt a model of co-creation.





Views of the exhibition *Sikhs in Singapore—A Story Untold* at the Indian Heritage Centre.

In March 2021, the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) launched *Sikhs in Singapore—A Story Untold*, featuring the history and culture of Singapore's Sikh community. The exhibition showcases over 450 artefacts from IHC and the National Collection, as well as 70 institutional and private collections. The exhibition also presents various aspects of the intangible cultural heritage of the community through video documentation and an interactive gaming experience, as well as contemporary installations in the form of illustrations, photography and film.

A product of close collaboration between IHC and the Sikh community, this exhibition is the largest-ever showcase of Sikh heritage in Singapore and IHC's second exhibition co-created with a community. Despite the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the IHC curatorial team engaged the community through a year-long process of consultation and outreach to establish narrative priorities, identify community loans and explore presentation methods.

We also partnered the community to co-develop complementary programmes such as talks, workshops and tours guided by representatives from the Sikh community. All these efforts have created a strong sense of ownership among members of the Sikh community, and sparked conversations of preserving and presenting their heritage for the next generation of Singaporean Sikhs.

### Why Co-Creation?

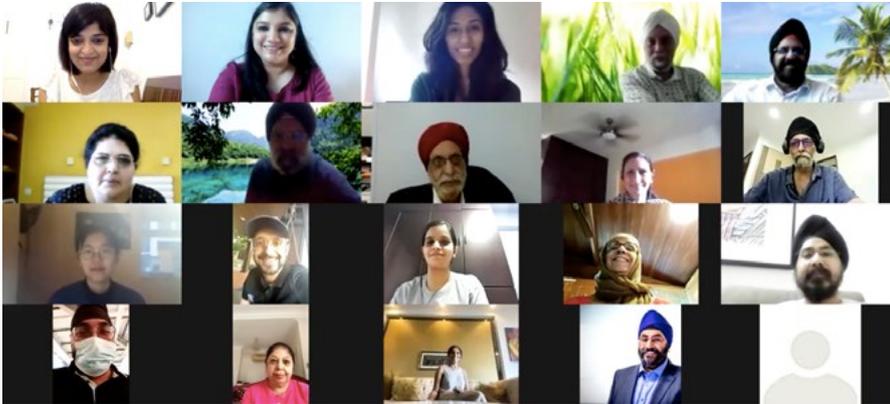
IHC, under the National Heritage Board, is dedicated to preserving and celebrating the heritage of the Singapore Indian community. The centre provides an inclusive platform to showcase the narratives and voices of the community, through exhibitions and programmes. One of the crucial ways in which IHC ensures that community voices are represented is by taking a co-creation approach for community-centric exhibitions.

In co-creating with the community, we recognise that the community holds cultural expertise and insight into their own history and practices. It is important for IHC, in its role as a forum for the community, to take a holistic approach and recognise the community as equal partners and stakeholders in exhibitions that intend to showcase their heritage, and to involve them as such.

This is particularly significant in the case of various sub-ethnic Indian communities in Singapore, about whom little has been documented, and the bulk of their communal life, intangible heritage and historical records rests in the collective memory of the community.

By partnering with the community from the outset, the exhibition is also made more meaningful for them, and ownership is shared between the institution and the community. As noted by Mr Param Ajeet Singh Bal, a third-generation Sikh in Singapore and a senior member of the community, "This exhibition is invaluable and a must for all young Sikhs to imbibe the strong Sikh values like *chardi kala*.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition will also generate a lot of pride among Sikh visitors of all ages and [they will] appreciate their progress along with other communities in Singapore." *Sikhs in Singapore* exemplifies IHC's approach towards the complex and multilayered process of co-creation, and the positive outcomes that it can generate when driven successfully.

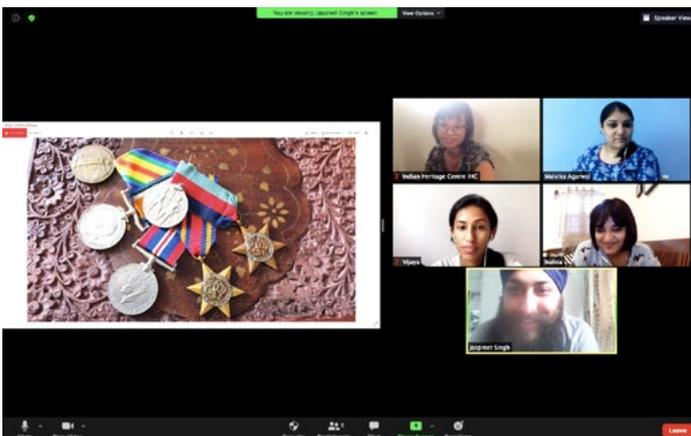
“It is important for IHC, in its role as a forum for the community, to take a holistic approach and recognise the community as equal partners and stakeholders in exhibitions that intend to showcase their heritage, and to involve them as such.”



Screenshot of a virtual meeting with the exhibition's working group of Sikh community organisations, comprising 17 representatives.



The curatorial team viewing artefacts with community members, in-person and virtually.



## Consulting, Communicating, Collaborating

The Sikh community in Singapore numbers about 13,000 individuals, and includes several organisations and institutions established by the Sikhs which are actively engaged in the community's life. From early 2020, in the lead-up to the exhibition, we identified both general and specific areas for community engagement and consultation.

Representatives of 17 community organisations participated in this consultative process and formed the working group of community representatives for this exhibition. These organisations included all seven Sikh temples in Singapore, as well as educational, sporting, cultural, youth and professional organisations established by and for the community.

The community was mainly consulted on matters pertaining to the exhibition's themes and narratives, identification of artefacts and outreach to collectors and families, as well as feedback on different elements of the exhibition organised throughout the year. It was crucial to engage the community early, as their feedback on the appropriateness and completeness of the narratives informed the first step of the planning process. Besides providing feedback, we also collaborated with the community on the production of various aspects of the exhibition.

From the outset, the Sikh community's organisations and various individuals had been instrumental in amplifying IHC's call for artefacts. As the exhibition was intended as a showcase of the community's historic materials, this outreach was central to the exhibition's success.

Thanks to these efforts, several new leaders reached out to IHC, providing us with the opportunity to showcase some stories and objects for the first time. With the community's help, we were also able to gain access

“As much of the Singaporean Sikh identity has been kept alive by being passed down through successive generations, it was crucial that we worked closely with the community to ensure that these stories were documented and told as part of the exhibition.

it was crucial that we worked closely with the community to ensure that these stories were documented and told as part of the exhibition.

The community also partnered the team in the documentation of various aspects of intangible cultural heritage central to the Sikh community. These include the documentation of rituals held at Sikh temples, especially those pertaining to the holy book of the Sikh faith, the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*; traditional food and culinary traditions; traditional craft; folk music and performances; the folk dance, *bhangra*; and the martial art, *gatka*.

The ritual traditions were shot at the Central Sikh Temple, while culinary traditions were not only recorded at the temple, but also in the homes of various community members, as well as a prominent Punjabi restaurant. Folk music traditions were documented with members of the Singapore Khalsa Association Ladies' Wing, and craft-making was recorded with members of Sunehri Saheliyan, a programme by the Sikh Welfare Council which promotes active ageing.

As part of the contemporary installations commissioned for the exhibition, IHC also partnered the Young Sikhs Association to co-curate a photography installation. Titled *Through the Lens*, the installation features 50 portraits of local Sikh youth, shot by photographer Afiq Omar. The Young Sikhs Association was instrumental in identifying younger members of the community who are engaged in diverse occupations and interests, and are representative of the contemporary face of the Sikh community.

The Singapore Sikh Education Foundation (SSEF) provided their expertise in the translation of the exhibition's textual content into Punjabi. This is the first time that IHC has included a third language—in addition to English and Tamil—as part of the exhibition display. Spoken by the majority of the Sikh community,

to several families and to private collections, which had never been displayed in Singapore before. These include the San Francisco-based Kapany Collection, the Phoenix-based Khanuja Family collection as well as the collections of Manraj S. Sekhon and Jaspreet Singh, both based in Singapore. Over several months, the team contacted over 100 potential lenders and collaborators, and viewed over 1,000 artefacts with the community, from which 450 were selected for eventual display.

To further document the stories of individuals, families and organisations, we conducted oral history interviews with over 60 community members, and these are presented in the exhibition as well. As much of the Singaporean Sikh identity has been kept alive by being passed down through successive generations,

A display at the *Sikhs in Singapore—A Story Untold* exhibition, featuring the stories of Sikh women in Singapore. The display includes traditional crafts, a video showing traditional craft-making, and a contemporary artwork by artist Keerat Kaur touching on Sikh women's experiences.





Documenting the rich intangible cultural heritage of the Sikh community.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Folk songs with members of the Singapore Khalsa Association Ladies' Wing; crafting traditions with members of Sunehri Saheliyan, an eldercare initiative by the Sikh Welfare Council; and the making of *dal* at the Central Sikh Temple.

Punjabi was included to improve accessibility for the older generation of Sikhs as it is their first language.

The exhibition also features a film series produced across the world by the Sikh diaspora as well as cooking and crafting demonstrations by community members. In partnership with SSEF, we trained students as volunteer docents for the exhibition, providing an opportunity for youths to get involved in their heritage. Gurdial Kaur, Chairperson, SSEF, noted that “the sessions were informative, engaging and meaningful. It was indeed a very enriching experience”.

Throughout this yearlong process, the IHC team tapped on the community's expertise on a range of subjects and support for various components of the exhibition. The community acted as consultants, advisers, content

providers and sounding boards—truly co-creating the exhibition with IHC.

### The Way Forward

The co-creation process is about bringing communities into the conversations surrounding collecting, curating and documenting. For IHC, this engagement has always been crucial to presenting the heritage of our communities in a holistic, inclusive manner. While IHC has benefited from the community's expertise and know-how, the community has also undergone a process of rediscovery and reconnection with their roots.

The exhibition and collaborative efforts have brought about a strong sense of ownership and pride amongst the Sikh community. The never-before-seen public display

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Through the stories presented at the exhibition, there is a sense of connectedness and rootedness that is emerging, which in turn sparks conversations about the future of the Sikh community and where it is headed.

of collections, the unearthing of stories that were hitherto unknown even amongst the community, and the dynamic showcase of aspects of their heritage for the wider audience have all led to a renewed appreciation among the community of their own heritage.

Significantly, the exhibition’s revelation of the depth and extent of the community’s surviving history has kickstarted discussions within the community on how they can preserve their heritage for the long term. This includes explorations on displaying and documenting the materials that IHC has discovered in the community, and a recognition that intangible cultural heritage—songs and crafts in particular—need to be passed on to the next generation to ensure their survival.

Younger members of the community have also felt reconnected to their heritage and identity as Sikhs in Singapore. Through the stories presented at the exhibition, there is a sense of connectedness and rootedness that is emerging, which in turn sparks conversations about the future of the Sikh community and where it is headed. In the words

of Sarabjeet Singh, President, Young Sikhs Association:

*Each of the exhibits contain significant messages, even lessons for younger Sikhs to understand and appreciate. This reflects the richness of the experience of Sikhs in Singapore even up to the present day. If there’s one thing that I hope younger Sikhs will take away after a visit to the exhibition, it would be that they have a deep appreciation for the privilege to continue writing this story of the community and its future narrative.*

The future of Sikh culture depends on the young today, and if the *Sikhs in Singapore—A Story Untold* exhibition has inspired them to learn more about their roots and connect with their heritage, we have much to look forward to in terms of how the community will continue to thrive and evolve.

Most of all, this exhibition has provided a glimpse into the abundant, meaningful possibilities when a community is engaged in the making of an exhibition that, ultimately, is about them and their heritage. As museum curatorial practice shifts from a top-down approach to a more inclusive, consultative one, the public can expect deeper, more heartfelt explorations of our roots, guided by the irreplaceable wisdom and knowledge embedded within communities.

Representatives from Sikh community organisations at the *Sikhs in Singapore* exhibition at the Indian Heritage Centre.



#### NOTE

- 1 The Punjabi term *chardi kala* loosely translates to ‘ascending energy’ or positive attitude. It refers to the attitude of positivity, cheerfulness and optimism in the face of adversity. It is an important Sikh principle, and one that all Sikhs are expected to maintain.



## **The Preservation of Sites and Monuments: A 50-year Journey**

**As the Preservation of Sites and Monuments celebrates its golden jubilee this year, *MUSE SG* casts an eye back on its beginnings and traces how far it has come.**

The Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) commemorates its golden jubilee this year. A division under the National Heritage Board, its primary role is to safeguard Singapore's built heritage by identifying monuments that are of "historic, cultural, traditional, archaeological, architectural, artistic or symbolic significance and national importance", and recommending them to the state for preservation.<sup>1</sup>

Gazetted National Monuments are accorded the highest level of protection by law. To date, there are 73 National Monuments comprising religious, civic and community structures, each representing a unique slice of history in multicultural Singapore.

**LEFT**

Gazetted as a National Monument in 1975, the Sultan Mosque's unique Indo-Saracenic architecture gives it a grandeur befitting its history as the mosque built for the Sultan of Johor.

**BELOW**

Night-time view of the former Telok Ayer Market (now known as Lau Pa Sat; Hokkien for 'old market'), 1990s. Today a thriving hawker centre, Lau Pa Sat was originally a market when it opened in 1823. It was one of the first buildings to be gazetted as a National Monument, in 1973.

Singapore Tourism Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

## Stirrings of State-led Preservation

PSM was formed in 1971 (then known as the Preservation of Monuments Board [PMB]) just six years after Singapore's independence—a time some considered highly improbable for the board's formation, while others might say it came too late. Singapore was then pursuing economic growth at full throttle, and urban renewal was the prevailing order as precious urban space was converted for commercial development and modern public housing.

Two studies on Singapore's urban renewal, led by United Nations (UN) teams, were carried out in 1962 and 1963 to assist the young government in urban planning. Both studies recommended intensive state-led urban redevelopment, but, significantly, the second UN mission emphasised that urban renewal and conservation were not mutually exclusive.

Highlighting the three imperatives of "conservation, rehabilitation and rebuilding" in urban redevelopment, the mission recommended "[a]n identification of the areas worth preserving" and "[a] programme to improve such areas and make them more habitable".<sup>2</sup> They recognised "the value and attraction of many of

the existing shophouses and the way of living, working, and trading that produced this particularly Singapore type of architecture".<sup>3</sup> While the state studied the reports and implemented many of the recommendations, the conservation of vernacular architecture was given less attention compared to the pressing need for public housing at the time.

## Gestation of National Monuments Trust

Following the 1963 UN study, a committee within the former Ministry of Culture was formed that same year to re-examine the list of significant monuments that had been included in the 1958 Master Plan. The team drew up new criteria for such a list—for instance, age was no longer a key factor and rebuilt sites were excluded, while the cost of preservation became a criterion. A significant outcome, though, was its recommendation of setting up a national trust that would officially identify monuments deemed worthy of preservation.

Despite this, the preservation of historic landmarks continued to take a backseat to the developmental imperative, and few inroads were made on the preservation front in the subsequent years. But as the pace of redevelopment continued, the ever-increasing risk of losing precious monuments only grew more acute. Advocacy for heritage conservation bubbled up within and outside of the bureaucracy; eventually, in 1967, a committee was tasked to draft the legislation for a National Monuments Trust.

## Constitution of Preservation of Monuments Board

On 2 September 1970, then Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker introduced the Preservation of Monuments Bill in Parliament "to establish a Board to preserve for the benefit of the nation, monuments of historic, traditional,





**LEFT**

The majestic *gopuram* (entrance tower) of Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple after restoration in 2018. The iconic Hindu temple was gazetted as a National Monument in 1978.

Ministry of Communications and Information Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

**BELOW**

A Preservation of Monuments Board meeting in 1985 chaired by Lien Ying Chow, who served as its founding chairman.

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

archaeological, architectural or artistic interest”.<sup>4</sup> In his second reading of the bill, Barker forewarned about the dangers of focusing only on urban renewal—that “we may wake up one day to find our historic monuments either bulldozed or crumbling to dust through neglect”.<sup>5</sup>

With the bill passed, PMB was constituted on 29 January 1971, under the Ministry of National Development. The board’s first chairman was banker Lien Ying Chow, with the rest of the board comprising private and public sector representatives.

More than two years after the board’s formation, Singapore’s first National Monuments were gazetted on 6 July 1973: eight buildings comprising six religious sites of Singapore’s major faiths, the former Telok Ayer Market (Lau Pa Sat) and Thong Chai Medical Institution. By the end of the decade, however, only 18 monuments had been preserved, most of which were religious sites.

The slow progress was attributed to gaps in the scope of powers vested in the statutory board. For instance, the preservation order could not be effectively applied to residences,

while private property owners were not keen to have their properties gazetted for preservation as it did not provide economic gains. And, in such cases, little could be done.

### Driving Forces: Tourism and Nation-building

In the early 1980s, the government became more aware of the benefits of conservation—in particular, conservation’s potential to provide rootedness and identity to a rapidly developing city-state, which in turn could drive tourism and nation-building.

Faced with dwindling tourist arrivals in the ’80s, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now Singapore Tourism Board) noted that the swift transformation of Singapore into a modern metropolis had stripped it of much of its charm that had been alluring for tourists. A remedy to this was to retain more vernacular architecture.

At the same time, the government realised that built heritage, as a tangible reminder of the past, could help connect citizens and create a shared identity of what it means to be Singaporean. As then Second Deputy Prime Minister S. Rajaratnam put it in a 1984 speech: “A nation must have a memory to give it a sense of cohesion, continuity and identity.”<sup>6</sup> Built heritage was thus seen as a pillar of collective memory that citizens could tap on to feel a sense of belonging to the nation.

Driven by these realisations, the government began embarking on heritage conservation in earnest. In 1989, the Urban Redevelopment Authority oversaw the gazetting of 10 historic areas for conservation, spanning parts of Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Gelam and the Singapore River. Over 3,000 shophouses were granted conservation status as a result. PMB, on the other hand, gazetted over 20 National Monuments in the ’90s; by





the end of the millennium, there were 43 National Monuments.

On 1 April 1997, PMB was transferred from the Ministry of National Development to the then Ministry of Information and the Arts so as to better fulfil its mission of creating greater awareness and appreciation of Singapore's built heritage and history.

### Preservation Arm of National Heritage Board

On 1 July 2009, PMB became a division under the National Heritage Board. The Preservation of Monuments Act was also amended to include national significance as a criterion for the selection of National Monuments. This led to the preservation of postwar buildings such as the former Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House (built 1965) and Jurong Town Hall (built 1974). These buildings were not only preserved for their architectural merit, but also for their significance in Singapore's post-independence history.

In 2013, PMB was renamed Preservation of Sites and Monuments to reflect its mission of preserving sites in addition to buildings and structures. Currently, PSM's responsibilities also include the

administration of the National Monuments Fund, which provides financial support to the restoration and maintenance of National Monuments; the nomination and inscription of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Singapore; and overseeing the 100 historic site markers for places identified as historically significant by the National Heritage Board.

### Future of Preservation

For over five decades, PSM has led efforts to preserve our national memory in the form of historic buildings, sites and structures. And just as Singapore continues to develop and mature as a nation, preservation policies will also undergo the necessary tweaks to meet new challenges. Meanwhile, PSM carries on its mission of ensuring that our built heritage will be amply protected and maintained for generations to come.



#### TOP LEFT

Then Minister for National Development S. Dhanabalan unveiling the Preservation of Monuments Board plaque at Raffles Hotel, 1992. Established in 1887, the historic hotel was gazetted as a National Monument in 1987.

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



#### ABOVE

Gazetted in 2015, Jurong Town Hall is one of the first postwar buildings to be ascribed preservation status. The building stands as a reminder of Singapore's industrial history. With its brutalist design and nautical elements, Jurong Town Hall also represents a unique piece of architecture among the monuments.

#### NOTES

- 1 Preservation of Monuments Act (Cap. 239, Rev. Ed. 2011), section 4(a).
- 2 Charles Abrams, Susumu Kobe and Otto Koenigsberger, *Growth and Urban Renewal in Singapore* (United Nations, 1963), 114, 121.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 4 E.W. Barker, "First reading of Preservation of Monuments Bill," September 2, 1970, vol. 30, col. 337. Retrieved from Parliament of Singapore website.
- 5 E.W. Barker, "Second reading of Preservation of Monuments Bill," November 4, 1970, vol. 30, col. 337. Retrieved from Parliament of Singapore website.
- 6 S. Rajaratnam, "Adaptive reuse: Integrating traditional areas into Kevin YL Tan, "The business of heritage in Singapore: Money, politics and identity", *Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Art. 31 (2020), 586–606, 28.

## What is the National Monuments Fund?

To ensure that our National Monuments are well preserved and will be so for time immemorial, they require regular maintenance as well as restoration works where necessary. For many years, monument owners had to bear the—at times hefty—costs of upkeeping the structures.

This changed in 2008 when the Preservation of Monuments Board (now Preservation of Sites and Monuments) launched the National Monuments Fund, a co-funding scheme for the restoration and maintenance of National Monuments owned and managed by non-profit or religious organisations. Kickstarted with an initial S\$5 million, by 2020 almost S\$32 million had been allocated to the fund. A central consideration is that the proposed works must not damage the monuments' historical and architectural significance.

The Monument Inspectorate determines whether the works are necessary and are sympathetic to the architectural character and importance of the monuments.

To date, the fund has benefitted 28 out of 31 eligible National Monuments. Between 2019 and 2020, S\$4.05 million was awarded to support the restoration and maintenance works for 23 National Monuments. These include first-time recipient St Andrew's Cathedral, which used the grant for the repair of its iconic bell tower and other works, Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple, Al-Abrar Mosque and Thian Hock Keng.



One of Singapore's oldest Chinese temples, Thian Hock Keng has benefitted from the National Monuments Fund. Over S\$170,000 disbursed to the monument owner has helped to partially finance repairs to the roof to address water seepage issues, and the treatment of rising damp.

## Let's hear from the Monuments Inspectorate...

The Monuments Inspectorate comprises a team of architects. Their main responsibilities are to ensure that National Monuments are well maintained and restored.

They also conduct consultations with the monument owners, provide advice on the best methods for restoration as well as carry out regular inspection at the monuments to check for maintenance issues such as plaster cracks and termite infestation.

**Chern Jia Ding, Senior Assistant Director, Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM)**, shares with us his experiences as part of the Monuments Inspectorate.

The former Keng Teck Whay Building before restoration. It originally housed the Keng Teck Whay—a 'brotherhood' for mutual aid founded in 1831 by 36 Hokkien Peranakan merchants from Melaka.



### What was the main draw that led you to joining PSM?

Being born and brought up in a typical Housing and Development Board flat built in the 1960s, my interest in historic buildings grew when I accompanied my mother to Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple on Waterloo Street. Each time the bus went under the gantry that marked the Restricted Zone (there were no Electronic Road Pricing gantries then), I would marvel at the beautiful pilaster works on the old shophouses and public buildings like the Old Hill Street Police Station and the Central Fire Station. So when I saw that there was a position at the then Preservation of Monuments Board in 2010, I submitted my application without any hesitation.

### Can you share an example and some details of the most memorable restoration project you have been involved in?

There are a number of restoration projects that I find quite memorable. One of them is the restoration of the former Keng Teck Whay Building at 150 Telok Ayer Street, carried out in 2012. The building sits on leases that dated back to between 1827 and 1833. It was gazetted as a National Monument in 2009, and the Singapore Yu Huang Gong (Temple of the Heavenly Jade Emperor) currently occupies it.

The building's half-round profile roof tiles were apparently made of plaster (*baohui* method), which is more commonly found in traditional Teochew-style building. But why would a Hokkien association building adopt a Teochew construction method?

During the restoration, we found that the roof was actually terracotta tiles and not plaster. The building owners had added layers of cement to stem water seepage problems. Over the years, the cement covering gave the impression that the roof was built using the *baohui* method. It was also clear that the green paint was of recent vintage due to its synthetic nature.



A cross-section of a roof tile of the former Keng Teck Whay Building, showing the original terracotta tile (reddish-brown material). During restoration works in 2012, it was discovered that the tiles were in fact terracotta and not plaster as previously assumed.

Photo courtesy of Design Link Architects Pte Ltd

The key takeaway from this is that it is important to apply the right method of repair to address water seepage issues. While wrapping cement over the tiled roof would temporarily solve the problem, it might actually cause more harm to the building in the long term, because the weight of the cement layers creates a greater stress load which would impact the timber structures supporting the roof. Therefore, it is important to engage a conservator to investigate or survey these historic buildings before restoration begins to ensure that there is maximum retention as well as accurate execution on site.

The restored former Keng Teck Whay, with the roof tiles in their original terracotta colour. Gazetted as a National Monument in 2009, the Singapore Yu Huang Gong (Temple of the Heavenly Jade Emperor) occupies the site today.



## Appreciating Our Built Heritage

While the National Monuments are meticulously maintained and restored to good condition to be preserved for posterity, these efforts become truly meaningful when the public is engaged and an appreciation of the merits of the monuments is cultivated. As such, preservation work undertaken by the Preservation of Sites and Monuments is augmented by the National Heritage Board's (NHB) outreach programmes that connect the people with the nation's iconic built heritage. Thanks to the far-reaching engagement efforts on the ground, the precious monuments not only gain greater visibility but are more deeply appreciated in terms of their historical and architectural significance.

One of the longest-running programmes is the *Monumental Walking Tours*, started in 2010. Trained volunteer guides lead weekly walking tours to selected National Monuments, each revolving around a theme such as 'Communities of Faith' or 'Stories of Kampong Gelam'.

In 2019, NHB launched the *Milestones Through Monuments* programme, which highlights the roles that National Monuments played during

significant periods in Singapore's history. The inaugural edition involved specially commissioned installations at the newly gazetted Singapore River Bridges to evoke the history of the bridges creatively through art. These installations included miniature origami bumboats (*twakow*) on Cavenagh Bridge and a reconstructed tram on Anderson Bridge, the latter a historical mode of transport that used to run across the bridge.

The outreach team also regularly conducts heritage-related programmes for schools to cultivate in students a greater appreciation and understanding of Singapore's collective memory.

As a result of the pandemic, the outreach team has shifted its programming efforts to the digital sphere to engage audiences. Initiatives such as the *Monumental Robo-Tours* and virtual tours provide visitors with the opportunity to explore participating National Monuments remotely with a guide—without having to step foot into the monuments. From their classroom, students participating in a *Monumental Robo-Tour* control a robot that navigates a monument, with a tour guide accompanying it. Another innovative initiative is the virtual escape game, *The Search for Our National Symbols*, which involves players travelling back in time to solve the mystery of the missing national symbols by searching the National Monuments.

As the pandemic continues, digital engagement remains the best option for keeping audiences engaged; with technological advances and social media, the Preservation of Sites and Monuments sees itself increasingly connecting with audiences through these mediums, alongside a return to physical tactile experiences when possible.

A volunteer guide leading a group of participants on a *Monumental Walking Tour* in the historic district of Kampong Gelam.



## Interview with Robert Chan, volunteer guide

**Robert Chan, 70, a self-employed business consultant, began volunteering as a museum guide in 2012 at the Peranakan Museum, and then the Malay Heritage Centre, National Museum of Singapore and Asian Civilisations Museum. Currently, he is also trained to guide the *Museum Educator* programme by the Preservation of Sites and Monuments and the Ministry of Education.**

**Chan shares with *MUSE SG* his thoughts on being a museum guide and the importance of heritage.**

### What led you to become a volunteer guide?

I've always been interested in storytelling and sharing. When I was in school, I would tell stories to younger students. At home, while watching English movies on TV, I would translate the English dialogue into Cantonese for my grandmother who didn't speak English. Furthermore, I developed a keen interest in history and I truly believe that for people to understand one another better, we need to know about each other's history.

### What do you like most about being a guide?

I enjoy sharing information with my audience and interacting with them. I've even made friends with some of them, one of whom was an elderly French lady who visited the Peranakan Museum. When I visited Paris, she brought me to the Musée Guimet and a walkabout around the Latin Quarter!

### What does heritage mean to you?

Heritage is what makes us what we are as a society today. Without heritage, we are merely a biological entity—existing, not living!

I was particularly moved recently watching the opening of Cairo's National Museum of Egypt Civilisation that showcases over 5,000 years of Egyptian heritage and how proud the Egyptians are of their rich heritage.

Each of the various races in Singapore has its equally rich ethnic heritage spanning hundreds and thousands of years. But as a country we have more than 200 years of modern heritage and only 50-plus years of national heritage.

Our Singaporean identity is the cumulation of these, and we become consciously aware of this when we travel abroad and people ask us about who we are and where we're from.

### Among the 73 National Monuments, which are some of your personal favourites, and why?

I love the 'mixed blessings' monuments in the Telok Ayer area—comprising the Thian Hock Keng temple, the Al-Abbar Mosque, the Chinese Methodist Church and the Sri Mariamman Temple—as they showcase the main religions of Singaporeans in close proximity. To me, they reflect the multicultural character of our nation.



Veteran volunteer guide Robert Chan with a robot that is navigated remotely by student participants of a *Monumental Robo-Tour* at Sultan Mosque.



## **Champion of the Museums: 25 Years of the Museum Roundtable**

**Singapore's premier museum collective,  
the Museum Roundtable, turns 25 this year.  
MUSE SG relives its impressive journey.**

Museums, as repositories of culture—that is, what makes us human—are indispensable institutions of any civilisation. For the past five decades, Singapore has witnessed the growth of a strong local network of museums, alongside a very encouraging upward trend in museum visitorship.

A key factor driving these developments could be attributed to the work of the Museum Roundtable (MR)—a membership-based collective of museums that aims to promote museum collaboration and a museum-going culture in Singapore.

As MR celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, we cast a reflective gaze on its journey thus far, and take stock of the achievements and challenges MR has faced over the years.



Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, a member of the Museum Roundtable, inherited the rich natural history collection from its predecessor, the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research.

Photo courtesy of Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum

Former Chief Executive Officer Lim Siam Kim of the National Heritage Board speaking at the official opening of the 1999 edition of *MuseumFest*, organised by the Museum Roundtable.

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

## Establishment of Museum Roundtable

Established in 1996 by the National Heritage Board (NHB) with a founding membership of just 10 museums, MR boasts 63 museums in its network today. The member museums span an impressive range of fields, from art, culture, community, defence and healthcare, to lifestyle, collectibles, natural history, and science and innovation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Singapore in early 2020, collectively the museums drew an annual visitorship of almost 9.6 million in 2019.

## Formative Years

MR was first set up as an informal unit under the then Public Affairs division of NHB. Two years later, in 1998, the group formalised its operations, developing its terms of reference for members, logo, brochure and website.

Despite its modest membership size in the beginning, MR set about uniting members to collectively organise events that would promote awareness and visitorship to museums. It held the first *MuseumFest* in May 1999, in conjunction with International Museum Day, with the participation of 13 member museums. Significantly, *MuseumFest* was also the inaugural

cultural festival by NHB; after several editions, the festival was folded into the *Heritage Festival* in 2004.

This formative era of MR saw it taking nascent steps to establish itself as an industry platform for the knowledge sharing and capability development of museum staff. Besides introducing learning journeys at museums, MR also launched the *Museum Roundtable Visit Series* in which the secretariat worked together with various member museums to host visits and tours for staff from other MR members.

## 2002–2010: Institutionalisation

Between 2002 and 2010, MR embarked on a new chapter—its institutionalisation. In 2002, for the first time, a membership application form was put in place for interested parties; they had to formally apply to or be invited by NHB to receive the MR membership. The same year also saw the launch of MR's website, which featured its members' exhibitions and programmes, further solidifying its identity as a museum partner.

On the programmes-front, MR began collaborating with members to develop museum outreach schemes that promoted public awareness of museums. These include the





annual island-wide museum awareness campaign held as part of International Museum Day, and *Children's Season*, which leverages the June school holidays to attract families and children to museums.

As the entity grew in scope and influence, MR also started to take on increased responsibilities not just for its members, but also for the museum sector as a whole. In 2003, the secretariat was appointed as the administering body for the Approved Museum Scheme launched in January that year. The scheme allows eligible museums to apply on behalf of their donors for tax deductions for artworks donated to the museums. This is a role that MR continues to play to this day.

In addition, MR expanded its liaison role for Singapore's museums on the international level, encouraging members to join the International Council of Museums and disseminating key information about the council to its members. With this, the MR secretariat had effectively moved beyond merely 'taking care' of its members and championing museum industry

schemes, to becoming the 'public face' representing all museums in Singapore on the global stage.

Following these developments, calls soon arose for MR to consider registering itself as a formal and independent museum association in Singapore. A study of museum associations around the world was conducted; in November 2005, a proposal was even submitted recommending that MR become an independent association. However, it was eventually decided for MR to retain its current structure as its members were satisfied with the way the platform was being implemented by NHB and there were also concerns over possible membership fees if a fully independent association was created.

### 2010–2019: Achieving Steady State

By 2010, MR had matured to 53 members with an annual visitorship of 6.5 million. At that point, MR had practically reached a steady state of affairs with a slate of regular programmes committed to developing



#### ABOVE LEFT

One of the late Dr Ng Eng Teng's iconic masterpieces, the *Mother and Child* sculpture was a generous donation to the National Collection by Dr Ng's family under the Approved Museum Scheme administered by the Museum Roundtable.

Ng Eng Teng  
*Mother and Child* 1996  
Bronze, 350 × 310 × 150 cm  
Gift of the Family of the late Dr Ng Eng Teng  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



#### RIGHT

The senior management of Museum Roundtable (MR) member museums coming together to discuss the direction of upcoming MR programmes during an annual management meeting.



#### ABOVE

A signature programme of the Museum Roundtable and the National Heritage Board, the annual *Children's Season* offers an exciting and educational line-up of programmes during the June school holidays.

the museum sector. Nonetheless, new initiatives were continually rolled out to further its mission. In 2011, MR unveiled its *Lunar New Year Hongbao* campaign with special rabbit-themed red packets distributed to the public at member museums. The following year also saw the launch of the *Battle for Singapore* series in conjunction with the 70th anniversary of the fall of Singapore. These efforts not only complemented, but also bolstered, the signature NHB and MR outreach programmes such as *Children's Season*.

In 2016, MR commemorated its 20th anniversary with an exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore. It featured over 30 key artefacts contributed by MR members which traced the history of the outfit and its growth, underscoring its continued commitment to playing a key role in the development of a vibrant and diverse museum landscape in Singapore. Staying steadfast to its mission of spreading public awareness of its member museums, the exhibition sought to promote the diversity of museums in Singapore and encouraged the public to visit these museums to experience the rich tapestry of local heritage.

#### MR's Role in the Pandemic

The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 presented an enormous challenge to the museum sector, sending shockwaves through the industry locally and globally. But, ironically, COVID-19 and its repercussions also brought MR to the fore, reinforcing its significance in the ecology of museums in Singapore. The decentralised nature of the local museum landscape meant that MR, as the only sector-wide museum platform, became best placed to take up the mantle of being the primary medium through which the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and NHB communicated and deployed pandemic-related support measures and safety guidelines to museums in Singapore.

Leveraging the special position of MR, MCCY entrusted it with the task of distributing pandemic-related support grants to museums in the private sector. Within a year, the MR secretariat had implemented three new grant schemes to financially support private MR members in their efforts to digitalise, continue staff training, and retain core competencies in the face of pandemic



“

COVID-19 and its repercussions also brought MR to the fore, reinforcing its significance in the ecology of museums in Singapore.

“

Despite setbacks and challenges along the way, MR has stayed the course and lent its unwavering commitment to nourishing and growing the museum sector. Now, as we face an unpredictable global public health crisis, MR will continue to adapt and meet the needs of museums in Singapore.



Building Excellence of the Museum Roundtable (2013 – present)

shutdowns and significantly reduced visitor numbers.

Internally, the MR secretariat also had to turn to digital technologies for its publicity efforts as well as programmes and engagement with its members and the public. The 2020 edition of *Children's Season* and the 2021 *Lunar New Year Hongbao* campaign took on a hybrid format in which core components were rolled out online, such as virtual games, contests and giveaways. Previously physical dialogue sessions and workshops were moved online as well, with eight webinars and as many virtual engagement sessions held in 2020.

### 25 Years and Many More to Go

Now in its 25th year, MR has proven itself to be an essential pillar in today's museum landscape in Singapore. Despite setbacks and challenges along the way, MR has stayed the course and lent its unwavering commitment to nourishing and growing the museum sector. Now, as we face an unpredictable global public health crisis, MR will continue to adapt and meet the needs of museums in Singapore.

The MR secretariat is immensely privileged and grateful to be able to collaborate with member museums over the years. Time and again, MR members—whether big, small, private or public—and NHB staff have shown their tireless support for MR, providing suggestions and contributing greatly to MR's sector-wide programmes. The remarkable growth of the museum network today is testament to MR's success, and with such heartening results, MR is further motivated to be the foremost champion of museums in Singapore.



#### ABOVE

In 2020, the pandemic led to the Museum Roundtable's *Children's Season* programme moving online. Children could enjoy virtual activities such as the Ai Love Museums Hide-N-Seek game at home.



# National Collection Spotlight

In this special column highlighting artefacts from the diverse National Collection, four conservators and one conservation scientist from the Heritage Conservation Centre share with us an artefact that speaks to them and the conservation process required for each unique item.

01

## Flask with Lid

A silver flask from the Tang dynasty (618–907) was one of many luxurious metalware recovered from a shipwreck that had occurred over 1,100 years ago off Sumatra. Besides their opulent appeal, gold and silver vessels were also popular among the Tang elite because it was believed that drinking and eating from them would enhance one's longevity.

This particular flask is notable for its large size and intricate workmanship. It is fully gilded, covered with the lush decoration of leaves and petals, and the handle is shaped like a snake. The pair of mandarin ducks on either side symbolise marital fidelity and harmony in traditional Chinese culture, as they are believed to mate with a single partner for life.

During conservation, the flask was observed to have foreign material deposits on its surface. Scientific analysis was thus carried out to identify the deposits in order to determine what conservation work was needed—for example, whether the deposits should be removed or retained.

A glossy light-coloured deposit found on the underside of the flask was identified as aragonite, a form of calcium carbonate found in the marine environment. Another dull brown substance found atop the flask's base was identified to be an acrylic polymer. Since acrylic was only invented after the Tang dynasty, it was likely from later alterations. It is not uncommon to find non-original material on artefacts, as these could have accumulated from the environment or from previous repairs. They are reminders that artefacts require consistent conservation to withstand the test of time.

Being a conservation scientist, I am privy to the intricacies of artefacts up-close and can uncover their secrets—a very fortunate position, indeed. Information gleaned from analysis helps to tell the story behind an artefact, and as the writer Maya Angelou puts it: “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

**Phua Xu Mei**  
Assistant Conservation Scientist





**CREATOR:** Unknown  
**DATE/PERIOD:** Tang dynasty, circa 830s  
**REGION:** Southern China  
**MATERIAL:** Gilded silver  
**DIMENSION:** 30.1 × 24.5 × 24 cm  
**ACCESSION NO.:** 2005.1-00385  
**COLLECTION OF:** Asian Civilisations Museum

03



02



01

**01**  
 Light-coloured, glossy deposit found on the flask's underside (see inset).

**02**  
 Brown substance found atop the flask's base.

**03**  
 A silver flask from the Tang dynasty uncovered from a shipwreck that had occurred more than 1,100 years ago. A symbol of opulence, the fully gilded flask features intricate workmanship, such as the lush decoration of leaves and petals, a handle shaped like a snake, and two mandarin ducks on either side.

02



## Grindstone and Roller

This grindstone and roller set is part of the Tang dynasty (618–907) cargo found in 1998 in a shipwreck off Belitung Island, Indonesia. The artefact was possibly from the Dvaravati culture (6–11th century) in central Thailand. This indicates that the ship likely made landfall at ports in this region during its voyage. It also suggests that some of the crew might be Southeast Asian in origin.

After spending more than a millennium underwater, a lot of salt had accumulated on the items. The Tang Cargo Collection, as it is known now, was desalinated in 2003 before being donated to the Asian Civilisations Museum in 2013.

Despite the previous desalination treatment, however, soluble salts continued to crystallise, forming a distinctive white residue that was attached strongly to the stone surface. As the salts were visually distracting and the recurring salt crystallisation might lead to the disintegration of the stone, desalination was repeated in early 2021. Much like receiving a clay mask treatment, a wet paste was applied to the stone surface. As the paste dried, it absorbed the soluble salts close to the surface—a technique known as poulticing.

Desalination is a major topic of study for me, so I was very excited to work on the Tang Cargo Collection. The practical experience has been enlightening, continually challenging me to improve the desalination treatment of these artefacts.

**Berta Manas Alcaide**  
Senior Conservator (Objects)



01



**CREATOR:** Unknown  
**DATE/PERIOD:** Circa 6–11th century  
**REGION:** Possibly central Thailand  
**MATERIAL:** Stone  
**DIMENSION:** 14 × 22 × 40 cm (grindstone)  
 and 27 × 5 cm (roller)  
**ACCESSION NO.:** 2005.1-00079  
**COLLECTION OF:** Asian Civilisations Museum

04



02

**01**  
 Detail of the white salts on the stone surface before the desalination treatment carried out in early 2021.

**02**  
 A wet paste was applied to the stone surface to draw out the salts—a technique known as poulticing.

**03**  
 The paste drying up and detaching itself from the stone.

**04**  
 The grindstone and roller after the desalination treatment. They are believed to be from the Dvaravati culture (6–11th century) in central Thailand.



03

03

## Kampong Pasir Panjang

*Kampong Pasir Panjang* (1965) from the National Gallery Collection is a watercolour drawing by Idris Mohamed Ali (1944–). Idris began painting at the age of 10. Unable to afford formal art training, he learnt from books, observation, practice and a brief tutelage under pioneer Malay artist, S. Mahdar. Famous for his watercolour landscapes and street scenes, Idris’s drawings of old Singapore serve as important historical documents. This work depicts Kampong Pasir Panjang (Pasir Panjang Village), which no longer exists today.

The watercolour drawing was found fully adhered to a piece of backing paper with glue and secured to a non-archival matboard using our favourite household repair item—the adhesive tape. This disastrous combination prevented the drawing from expanding and contracting evenly when the environmental humidity fluctuated, thus causing ‘wrinkles’ (undulation) to form. To reduce this stress and improve the overall aesthetics, the matboard was removed and the adhesive softened with moisture to carefully remove the backing paper from the drawing.

This drawing was particularly memorable because not one—but two—hidden watercolour drawings were discovered during treatment! One was found on the back of *Kampong Pasir Panjang* (untitled and undated) and the other on the backing paper, titled *Alley Singapore* and dated 1989. This brought back fond memories of the Kinder Surprise chocolate—the joy of discovering the toy hidden within the chocolate shell. Moments like these are rewarding, and I feel privileged to be part of the conservation field, being able to uncover the secrets and stories behind the precious objects under our care.

### Jane Tan

Assistant Conservator (Paper)



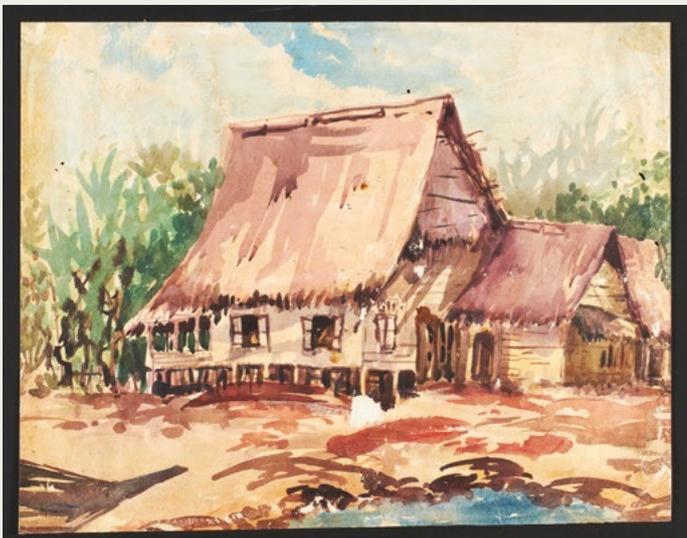
01



02



**CREATOR:** Idris Mohamed Ali  
**DATE/PERIOD:** 1965  
**REGION:** Singapore  
**MATERIAL:** Watercolour on paper  
**DIMENSION:** 29 × 37 cm  
**ACCESSION NO.:** 2018-00634  
**COLLECTION OF:** National Gallery Singapore



**01**  
 The watercolour drawing *Kampong Pasir Panjang* (1965) by artist Idris Mohamed Ali.

**02**  
 Using agarose gel to remove adhesive residue. Agarose is a highly purified form of agar, a jellylike food item that is familiar in this part of the world.



**03**  
 Two hidden watercolour drawings were discovered during treatment, one on the back of *Kampong Pasir Panjang* which is untitled and undated (ABOVE LEFT), and the other on the backing paper, *Alley Singapore*, dated 1989 (ABOVE). Treatment is ongoing.

04

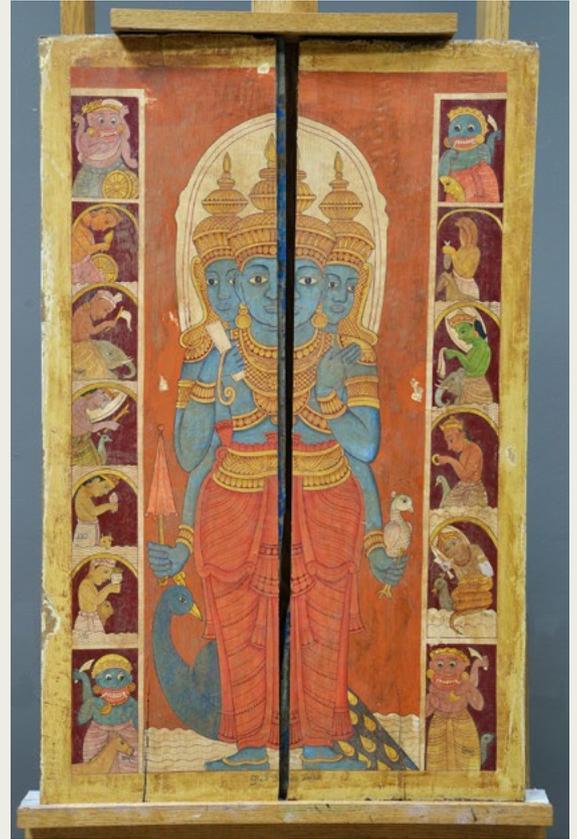
## Murugan Surrounded by Planetary Deities

The painting *Murugan Surrounded by Planetary Deities* from the Asian Civilisations Museum Collection is a rare 19th-century painted representation of a three-headed standing Murugan—a Hindu and Tamil deity—with a peacock vehicle. Often found in Buddhist monasteries all over Sri Lanka, this depiction demonstrates the absorption of Hindu deities into Buddhism. This painting also provides an insight into the provincial Kandyan style that diffused in the 19th century as the kingdom lost its power and the artists disbanded.

Created in a water-based technique, the painting was made on two wooden planks originally held together by a tongue-and-groove joint and natural glue. The main conservation issues were the separation of the panel at the joint as well as the development of splits and spiral distortion caused by the contraction of the wooden material. The paint layer was also covered with surface dirt, and it had several cracks resulting from the unstable wooden support. It was decided to reduce the planks' spiral distortion and rejoin them using the traditional glueing technique.

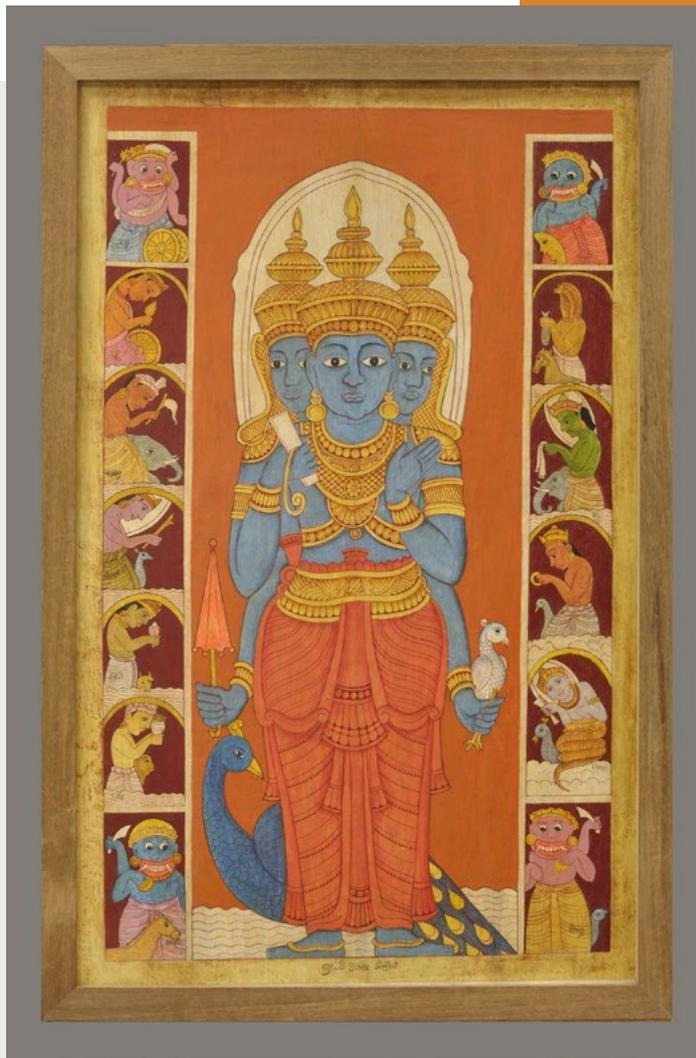
Meticulous cleaning of the paint layer gradually revealed the original vivid colours. However, the most challenging part of the conservation process was the linear stabilisation of the panel, which consisted of pulling and glueing distorted surfaces back into the panel. The success of these complex treatments required risk assessment and good planning, combined with knowledge and skills. Since the painting was going to be displayed permanently, it was important to frame it in such a way as to improve its integrity and display conditions. Thus, a wooden frame was designed and fabricated to compensate for some minor panel distortions and to enhance the look of the painting.

**Damian Lizun**  
Senior Conservator (Paintings)



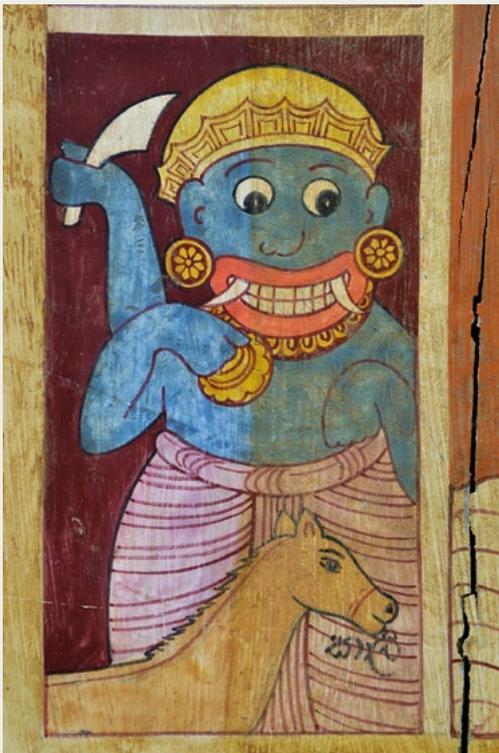
01





04

**CREATOR:** Unknown  
**DATE/PERIOD:** 19th century  
**REGION:** Sri Lanka  
**MATERIAL:** Water-based paint on wooden panel  
**DIMENSION:** 95 × 58.5 × 2 cm  
**ACCESSION NO.:** 2006-01743  
**COLLECTION OF:** Asian Civilisations Museum



02



03

**01**  
 The painting before treatment. Separation of the panel is visible in the centre.

**03**  
 The wooden planks being rejoined.

**02**  
 Detail of the painting during treatment. Left side is cleaned; right side is uncleaned.

**04**  
 Painting after conservation treatment in the custom-made frame.

05

## **Baju Panjang**

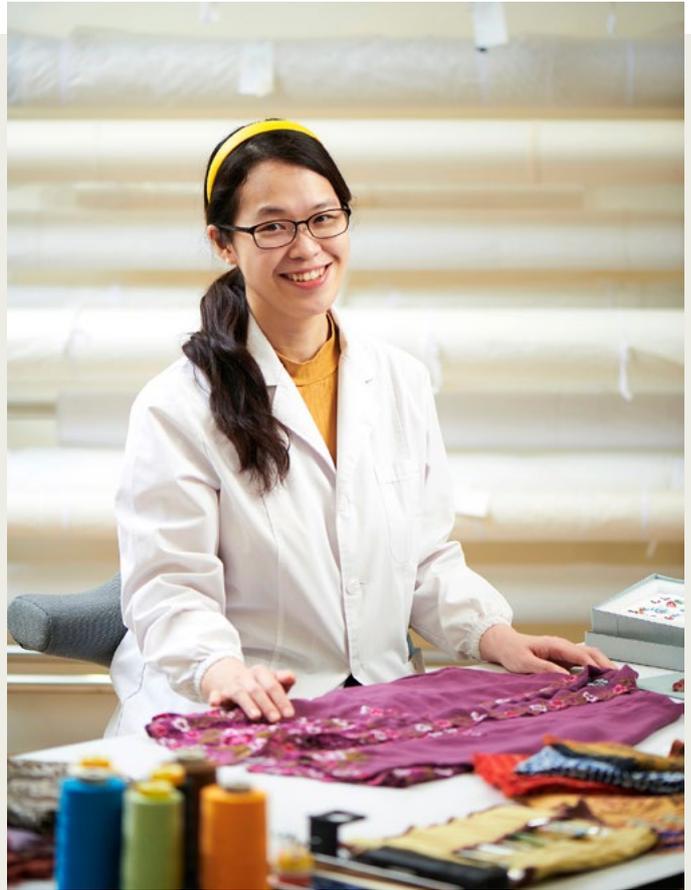
This *baju panjang* (Indonesian for ‘long dress’) from the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) Collection dates to around 1725–50 from South Sumatra. The Malay *baju panjang* is a long, loose coat once popular with both men and women. It relates to the Indo-Arabic banyan worn by Gujarati merchants and later became popular with Europeans. Malay popular tradition holds that the *baju panjang* was introduced with the arrival of Islam in the Malay World, which saw a more modest form of dress.

The *baju panjang* shown here was fashioned from Indian trade cotton imported from the Coromandel Coast, resist-dyed and hand-painted with fine floral motifs. Though the garment appeared complete, a closer inspection revealed many stains, tears, holes and patch repairs. The repairs made using a similar fabric were likely done by the garment’s owner, suggesting that this garment had been cherished and worn frequently. However, these repairs have also altered the garment’s silhouette, resulting in areas with permanent creasing. To reduce stress on the creased fibres and to improve the look of the garment, creases were relaxed with a cool mist before being flattened under glass weights.

A cushion mount was customised for the garment’s display. Though its distorted silhouette proved challenging as creasing could not be avoided, modifications were made to this mount during test-fitting to minimise this. A separate support for the collar was also created.

This garment reminded me how privileged we are as conservators, working with artefacts that have so many stories to tell. This garment was particularly memorable because its physical condition shares with us a very human experience: the care we take with the things that are precious to us. This *baju panjang* is currently on display at ACM’s Fashion Gallery.

**Geraldine Sim**  
Conservator (Textiles)





03

**CREATOR:** Unknown  
**DATE/PERIOD:** Circa 1725–50  
**REGION:** South Sumatra, Indonesia  
**MATERIAL:** Visually assessed as cotton  
**DIMENSION:** 87 × 149 cm  
**ACCESSION NO.:** 2011-00087  
**COLLECTION OF:** Asian Civilisations Museum



01

**01**  
 Many small repairs were made in this area. These repairs were likely carried out by the owner, suggesting that this garment had been cherished and worn frequently.



**02**  
 A larger repair can be seen in this image alongside a crease that may have been caused by it—can you see it? (Lighting for the image differs here as a raking light was used to highlight the creasing.)

**03**  
 After treatment, a cushion mount and collar support were customised for the garment's display. Though creases remain, they have been relaxed and the collar is now better supported.

02

# Meet the Expert— Phyllis Koh

**Senior Conservator  
(Paper), Heritage  
Conservation Centre**



**Phyllis Koh has been a paper conservator at the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), National Heritage Board, for 14 years. Koh graduated with a Bachelor of Science (Life Sciences) from the National University of Singapore, and a Masters of Conservation in Fine Art from Northumbria University, UK. She is currently the head of paper conservation in HCC, where she leads a team of paper conservators. Her interests include Southeast Asian materials and artworks, such as 20th-century Vietnamese paintings.**

**What was a typical day in the life of a paper conservator like before the pandemic?**

There is usually a myriad of different activities in the day, like when we are in the paper lab, we could be carrying out photo-documentation and treatment on the collection such as documents, drawings, maps, prints, etc. We could also be supervising framers on the mounting and framing of paper works that will be displayed at the exhibitions. At times, we may have impromptu gatherings around the lab table to quickly discuss on a difficult treatment or to distribute exhibition work. Besides exhibition projects, a few of us might be involved in research projects or at the museums to carry out installation work onsite.

**How has the pandemic changed the way you work, given how hands-on your work is?**

I think now we all must be even more conscious of how we plan and spend our time, to balance the administrative needs and bench work. For example, I tend to focus more on the critical hands-on work on the designated days that I'm at the Heritage Conservation Centre and try to clear as much administrative work when I work from home. I think the pandemic is also a good opportunity for my colleagues and I to examine if there are areas in which we could be more efficient and still be able to meet the exhibition deadlines.

**Have there been any significant changes in the paper medium over time that have also fundamentally altered the way paper conservation is done?**

In the collection, I have come across the earlier handmade rag (cotton) papers that are of very good quality; later on, modern papers were mostly machine-made with wood pulp which produced lower-quality papers. However, even with changes in the paper medium over time, the agents of deterioration or factors that cause damage to paper collections are largely still the same. People and non-ideal environments are still the major factors causing damage, such as rough handling, folding, gluing, high humidity, etc.

By and large, I would say that we still use similar techniques in conserving these paper items from different periods of time. However, I have also noticed that there is a lot more awareness on sustainability, health and safety concerns on the materials used in paper conservation techniques. I think with the growing contemporary paper works in the collection, we also need to look outwards, be more creative and open about conserving paper works and see what new techniques could be adopted.

**What is one of the most memorable items you've worked on?**

Nine years ago, I treated a Thai manuscript (2012-00734) from the late 19th to early 20th centuries which had extensive insect damage. It left a deep impression on me because I had never seen such extensive damage by silverfish. Besides the major losses on many pages of the manuscript, it came with a lot of insect frass (insect faeces) and flattened silverfish carcass in between the pages.

While there was a lot of work involved in stabilising the manuscript for an exhibition, I had a deep sense of satisfaction treating this artefact. I removed the insect frass via



#### CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Pressure sensitive tape that is attached on the paper support is removed with a heated spatula.

One method of surface cleaning is using a soft hake brush made of sheep hair.

Examining the surface of a drawing with a microscope.

vacuuming and scraping, including the dry silverfish carcass. I enjoyed in-filling the losses as well, including repairing the cover, so that the work could be safely handled and displayed in the museum thereafter.

#### **Having been in the field for 14 years, is there a philosophy in conservation work that you might have found yourself inadvertently applying to life in general?**

I think there are so many things in conservation work that can be applied to life! In the treatment process, we would usually examine the work in detail, consider the treatment aims, options, and plan our time to carry out treatments, especially for major ones. I think the greatest takeaway from that would be not to lose the big picture while looking at the finer details, to weigh the options we have, planning well ahead and not to assume things. I think being a conservator has also made me a

better person as compared to 14 years ago—I am more organised and have a better sense of order, which is also important for housekeeping at home!

#### **What do you think is the biggest challenge in the field of (paper) conservation today?**

I think one of the biggest challenges today is that, increasingly, conservators have to find ways to stay relevant and adapt to the changing landscape. Traditionally, the conservation profession is very hands-on, but now we have to get used to being more front-facing, especially with the rise in digital offerings, increased demand for public access and outreach programmes—for example, the use of social media in the cultural sector.

Besides having conservation skills and knowledge, I think we will also need to influence and communicate more effectively with the various

stakeholders. Hopefully, having an openness to acquiring new skills, a broader view and a better understanding of our organisational context will help conservators find creative ways to rise to the challenge in this brave new world!

**Please share with us some tips for protecting our books in Singapore’s climate!**

Unfortunately, the climate in Singapore is really humid and many of the books nowadays contain wood pulp, which would easily allow acids to form in the paper. As such, our books tend to discolour easily or have foxing (yellow spots).

As much as possible, keep your books far away from food sources or areas with high moisture. If possible, make sure that there is enough ventilation and that they are not closely packed. If you intend to store them in boxes, consider archival materials that are acid-free. It is recommended to have a good dusting regimen if they are kept in open storage areas. Lastly, one can consider a digital dry box if they have precious books that they wish to keep at a lower and stable relative humidity.

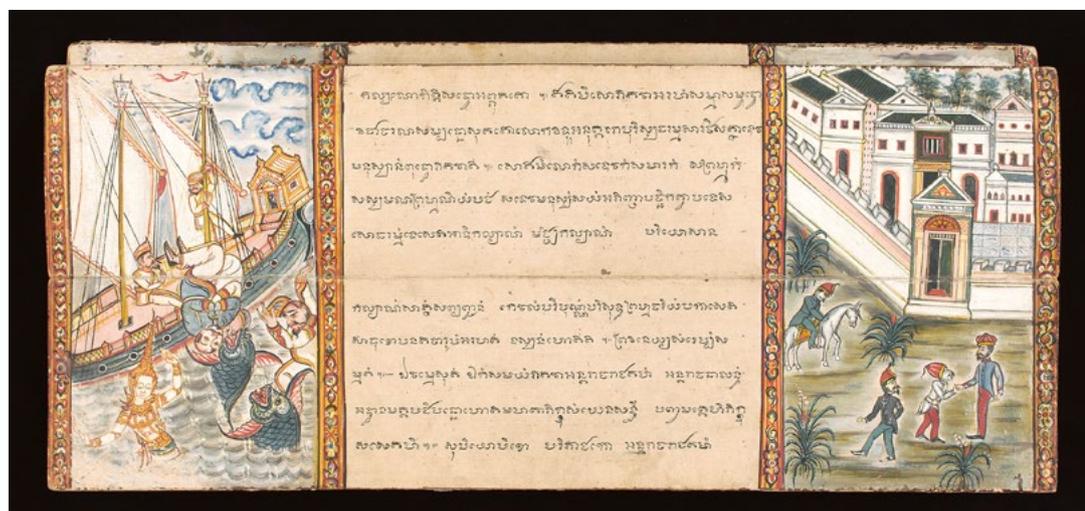


←  
**LEFT**  
Silverfish carcasses and holes made by the silverfish on the inside of a Thai manuscript.

→  
**RIGHT**  
A Thai manuscript (late 19th–early 20th century) sustained extensive losses due to insect damage.



←  
**LEFT**  
Insect faeces and dry silverfish carcass had to be removed via vacuuming and scraping.



Illustrated pages from the Thai manuscript (late 19th–early 20th century) on exhibition after conservation treatment. The manuscript, which is in the form of a folding book, is written in the Pali language and Khom script. It depicts the 10 Birth Tales (*Thostsachat*), the last 10 of 550 tales of the previous lives of the Buddha before his birth as Prince Gautama.

# AS SEEN...

Portraits of essential workers in Bob Lee's *Unsung Heroes* series commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore



**Munappil Presobithan Pradeesh** • Assistant Operation Manager, Sembcorp



**Noor Hayati binte Bakar** • Train Service Ambassador, SMRT



**Yusof bin Mahawan** • Postman, Singapore Post



**Chloe Ting Ri Yan** • Resident Physician, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital



National  
Heritage  
Board