

A NEW CHAPTER: THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM (ACM)

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THE ORIGINAL ACM (1991 – 2015)

The ACM was created out of the recommendations of the Singapore Museum Precinct Master Plan 1991, devised by the then culture ministry, the Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA). This study projected Singapore's long-term planning needs for museum spaces and facilities, based on a recommended collection development strategy.¹ The strategy took as its starting point the need to convert other historic buildings within the civic district to serve as museums. This was not only a cost-saving measure, but was also meant to address the criticism of the widespread destruction of much of Singapore's architectural heritage in the preceding decades.

Conceived as an offshoot of the National Museum, the ACM was intended to eventually be set up in two separate locations within the Civic District: a first iteration, ACM1 at the Tao Nan school building on Armenian Street (now the Peranakan Museum) opened in April 1997, while ACM2 at the Empress Place Building opened in March 2003. After more than a decade, the government decided in 2014 to fund a S\$25 million revamp of the ACM to expand and refresh its galleries so as to enhance visitor experience.

THE COLLECTION: ART VS. ETHNOLOGY AND HISTORY

ACM's original mission was "to explore and present the cultures of Asia, and to interpret the civilisations that created them, so as to promote awareness of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans and of the heritage of the Southeast Asian region". It was "pioneering the idea of an Asian civilisation – not as a dogmatic thesis but as a tentative hypothesis to be examined and tested both in the permanent collection and in a series of temporary exhibitions being arranged with many other Asian countries over a period of years".²

Firstly, the aim of the ACM was to represent the high points of Asian artistic development, through an 'aesthetic display' as "objects of art in their own right". Hence, based on the national collection, generally there were two approaches to the narratives of the galleries: firstly, for collection areas where there were already substantial holdings (for example, for ethnographic / anthropological collections from the old Raffles Museum and Peranakan material which had been actively collected from the 1980s), galleries were planned based on the strengths of the collection³, as well as the availability of (potential) loans. Given the space limitations at ACM1, there was only one

comprehensive display, of Chinese art. Secondly, for relatively new collecting areas, such as South and West Asia, the curators determined themes to be explored in the new permanent galleries. For example, for West Asia, Islam was showcased in three themes - as a Way of Life, Islamic Art, and Seeking of Knowledge. Based on these themes, new acquisitions were then added to the collection accordingly.

GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS VS. 'CIVILISATIONS' AND CULTURES

From the earliest planning stages the intention was for ACM to focus on core geographical regions – Southeast, East, South and West Asia – as conceived as part of a wider interaction with the world. ACM was meant to eventually exhibit "the rare arts of East, South, West and Southeast Asia and interpret the cultures which produced these rare arts".⁴ These geographical regions were supposed to directly represent the 'ancestral cultures' of Singapore's main racial groups, i.e. Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO), through their roots in China, the Malay World, India, and other regions, such as Arab traders. However, the system proved problematic because of the conflation of the two. ACM was organised by a dual system of regions (Southeast Asia being exceptionally multicultural and multi-religious) as well as by a system of traditionally defined, monolithic cultures (China and India). This emphasized the chauvinism of those cultures, with minorities and interconnections less frequently represented.

Regions were not also comprehensively covered. For example, while labeled 'East Asia', no other cultures besides China were represented.⁵ Similarly, 'West Asia' actually referred to the collection area of 'Islamic' arts of the Muslim world (which included territories as diverse as

the Arab lands, Anatolia, Central Asia, Iran and even South and Southeast Asia). 'South Asia' referred almost exclusively to India (and more specifically, Tamil Nadu in the South), while Gandhara, Sri Lanka, and the Himalayas were almost entirely absent, although later acquisitions and gallery modifications helped to address this imbalance. The South Asia gallery also contained a section focused on the 'Islamic' architecture and decorative arts of the Mughals, which further complicated the distinction from the 'Islamic' / West Asia gallery.

A NEW CHAPTER: THE NEW ACM (2015 - 2017)

The new ACM, which will be launched in three phases from November 2015, emphasizes the historic connections between cultures, and pushes the notion that cultures have never been fixed over time.

TWO MAIN THEMATIC THREADS

New entrances and expansions allow a different overall flow and conceptualization of the museum. The different floors, which were extremely difficult to link in the past, will present two different multi-cultural narratives: the first floor will focus on trade and the exchange of ideas, while the second floor galleries will focus on the spread of ancient religions.

The themes of exchange and inter-cultural contact will be reinforced throughout all the galleries. Panels will draw attention to the historic features of the building or to neighbouring monuments visible through windows. Since Singapore's historical foundations in trade and immigration are immediately evident in the Singapore River, this takes advantage of the ACM setting. Each gallery will also have a panel

1. According to this study, the recommendation for a 20-year collection horizon (by 2010) was to plan for a 'final' collection of 100,000 objects, and to plan for the museum precinct to accommodate such a collection. Barry Lord, "Cultural Resources Planning & Management", in *National Museum, Singapore – Museum Precinct Master Plan (1990)*.

2. Barry Lord, *Emerging National Identities: A Look at Asia*. Paper presented at a meeting of the Association of American Museums in 1998.

3. At the time of the collection audit by Lord in 1990, only 3% of the national collection was categorised as Fine Art – the majority was History (42%), Ethnography (32%) or Archaeology (23%). Lord, 1990. Hence, for example, the West Asia gallery – being the last collecting area for the museum – was originally mainly filled by long-term loans from the Tareq Rajab museum of Kuwait. The narratives for the Southeast Asian galleries were also shaped by the collection, which included extremely diverse elements such as island Southeast Asia, Hill people of mainland Southeast

Asia, vernacular Buddhism (a new collecting area), Vietnam (Sinicized Southeast Asia), the 'Malay world', textiles and metal work (jewellery and weaponry) and the 'performing arts' (a gamelan set from one of the Yogyakarta courts was acquired for this purpose).

4. Kwa Chong Guan, *Structure and Themes of the Asian Civilisation Gallery in the NM Precinct (1990)*.

5. This was because the Chinese population in Singapore was "not directly related to Japan, Korea and the northern nomadic peoples across the central Asian and Siberian steppes", and the national collection did not include any artefacts from these other regions. *Storylines for the Second Wing of the Asian Civilisations Museum*, 22 Jul 1999.

to discuss the relevance of history to culture today in Singapore and its surrounding regions.

TRADE: THE EXCHANGE OF GOODS AND IDEAS

This gallery focuses on trade exchanges to allow visitors to discover cultural connections through trading networks. As a major port city, Singapore is the product of many different peoples living together: the ACM similarly reflects the unique qualities of Singapore's blended communities. The display will introduce the historical context of trade routes, both land and sea, and key production centres of port cities across Asia.

Themes explored include early trade between China and Southeast Asia; the continuation of trading links between China and the Islamic worlds; encounters between Europe and Asia from the 1500s; expanding markets in the 16th and 17th centuries; *Kunstkammer* and luxury goods; Southeast Asian trading ports and mixed communities; and trade and missionary work.

The gallery display will include a mix of media, ranging from Chinese export ceramics, metalwork, trade textiles, paintings, exotic materials, furniture and decorative art. Visitors are encouraged to discover the deep connections that link artistic and cultural traditions in Asia and the world.



*A view of Singapore harbour, by an unknown Chinese artist, Singapore, c.1830, oil on canvas
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum*



*Ritual Hanging, Coromandel Coast, India, early 18th century
Cotton; painted, mordant and resist-dye
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum*



*Casket Gujarat, India, 16th century
Mother-of-pearl, wood and silver
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum*



*Octagonal cup with musicians and a dancer
China, ca. 830
Gold
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum*



*Vishnu with Lakshmi and Saraswati
Eastern India, 12 century (Pala Kingdom)
Bronze with silver inlay
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum*

**KHOO TECK PUAT GALLERY
(TANG SHIPWRECK)**

A new gallery on the riverfront wing will trace the early roots of trade in Singapore and the region, through a shipwreck carrying a large Chinese cargo bound for the Middle East dating from the 9th century. This gallery will reveal the strong commercial and cultural links between China, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East one thousand years ago: linking Tang China, Southeast Asian Srivijaya, and the Abbasid Empire in the Near East. It also serves to demonstrate Singapore's historical strategic location as a pivot point along the maritime Silk Route.

FAITH AND BELIEF: THE SPREAD OF ANCIENT RELIGIONS

The second floor galleries will emphasize the connections between the cultures of Asia through the major role played by religion, witnessed especially as ancient Indian religions that spread to the rest of the continent. As Buddhism and Hinduism migrated, visual expressions adapted and changed within local cultures.

The first gallery will present the origins of the oldest pan-Asian religion: Buddhism. The ancient Vedic sources of Buddhism and Hinduism in India will be explored, along with the interactions between the two religions. The gallery will show purely symbolic representa-



Brush rest
 China, Jingdezhen, 1506-21
 Marked: 大明正德年製 (Made in the Zhengde reign of Ming dynasty)
 Porcelain
 Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum



Opium bed
 China, Chaozhou, 1875
 Gilded and lacquered namwood
 Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

tions of religious ideas to the flowering of figural Buddhist art in the 3rd and 4th centuries. The gallery will conclude with the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia, drawing a strong connection with Singapore's region.

Two adjacent galleries will focus on Islam and Christianity in Asia. These will open in Phase Three of the redevelopment

**THE KWEK HONG PNG WING:
 CHINESE AND CONTEMPORARY ART**

A gallery dedicated to merchant, court and the scholar's studio will focus on the scholar in Chinese culture, and how this aspirational ideal took hold in wider Chinese society through the social hierarchy.

The display examines how early diaspora Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia, mostly merchants and traders, explored and redefined their cultural identities in relation to the ideals of Chinese taste reflected in the lives of the literati and in the culture of the imperial courts.

Objects will be used to illustrate key concepts such as the scholar-official, Confucianism, imperial tastes and status, the four pursuits - namely, *qin* (a musical instrument), *qi* (a strategy game), *shu* (calligraphy), and *hua* (painting) - and patronage. Chinese furniture, both studio and regional variations, will be displayed. This will help to illustrate how ancient scholars in the Ming and Qing dynasties lived and worked. Comparisons will be made to the original contexts in southern China - in Fujian, Teochew, and Canton.

CHINESE CERAMICS

A new gallery of Chinese ceramics will open in Phase Two. An entry into an understanding of Chinese ceramics as art, the gallery aims to encourage close contemplation of physical traits appreciable by the naked eye - body, glaze, and form. Visitors will use this as a starting point to explore broader contextual questions, such as the historical development of ceramics in China, and its importance in international networks of trade, culture, and technology. Themes explored will include the history of Chinese ceramics from the Neolithic period to the Qing dynasty, and specific case studies: Dehua porcelain of Fujian province, porcelain made in Europe after Chinese models, and Transitional ware.

CONCLUSION

The ACM reflects Singapore's unique position in the world at the intersection of many cultures. From the museum collection's origins as an ethnographic collection of a colonial museum, its remit has expanded beyond monolithic 'ancestral' cultures of Singapore's immigrant population, to incorporate new pan-Asian approaches to cultural studies and the humanities. The revamped ACM devotes special attention to the artistic connections between cultures, and blended artistic forms, or cross-cultural art. This distinguishes Singapore and the ACM from other civilisation museums around the world.