

SINGAPORE AS A KEY TO  
UNDERSTANDING ASIA:

# The Asian Civilisations Museum as a Cross-cultural Institution

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The Asian Civilisations Museum is simultaneously an old and new institution, and one which has remade itself periodically to respond to changes in the cultural environment, not just in Singapore but regionally. The latest renovation and repositioning of the museum, which opened in November 2015 and April 2016, should be seen in this long scheme of development.

The museum traces its roots to the Raffles Library and Museum, which began to collect, if on a small scale, in 1849. The museum was at first located in rooms on the second floor of the Town Hall, a theatre which was later absorbed into the Victoria Memorial Hall (now Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall). The beginnings of the museum were thus immediately adjacent to the present site of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). The Raffles Museum moved into a purpose-built structure at Stamford Road in 1887, and it is the core building of the present National Museum of Singapore. The collection policy for the earlier part of the twentieth century focused on ethnology (“objects of native art”) and archaeology. In 1991, the National Museum was split into three museums based on curatorial departments within the museum: the Singapore History Museum, the Singapore Art Museum, and the Asian Civilisations Museum.

This policy was based on a new collection development strategy and projections for the long-term needs of museum spaces in Singapore.<sup>1</sup> With the century-old National Museum as a base, the Museum Precinct Master Plan 1991 mandated the conversion of historic buildings in the centre of the city to serve as museums. In part, this was meant to address criticism of the widespread destruction of much of Singapore’s architectural heritage in the preceding decades. This scheme set into motion the significant expansion of Singapore’s state museum sector. The Singapore Art Museum moved into the elegant former Saint Joseph’s Institution building; the National Gallery was spun off from it and is now in the former Supreme Court and City Hall. The Asian Civilisations Museum first occupied the Tao Nan School at Armenian Street and then moved into the colonial administration building

on Empress Place in 2003. A section of ACM became the Peranakan Museum at the old Tao Nan School.

## New collection policy

Strategic planning is rarely a linear or controlled process for public institutions, as many fortuitous considerations come into play which might involve donors, political considerations, and changes in audience needs. In 2009, the ACM secured funding for a new wing from the Hong Leong Foundation, long-time supporters of the museum (Figure 1). The following year, government funds became



Figure 1. Kwek Hong Png Wing of the Asian Civilisations Museum. Designed by GreenhillLi. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

available to expand the museum’s collection. These two factors led to an accelerated analysis of the future needs of the museum, and the development of a new collection policy.

A new collection policy was developed by the author after his arrival as director in July



Figure 2. Virgin and Child, Sri Lanka, 16th century. Ivory.  
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.



Figure 3. Kendi, China, late 17th century. Silver.  
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.



Figure 4. Incense burner. Porcelain: China, early 18th century; Gilded bronze mounts: France, early 18th century.  
Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

2010, in close consultation with the CEO of the National Heritage Board, Michael Koh, and the chairman of the museum's board, Lee Suet Fern. The museum's curators had completed a major installation of the museum a few years previously, and were understandably reluctant to begin a new planning process immediately, so external experts in their fields were consulted. It was noted that the museum's collection as of 2009 did not reflect Singapore's status as a multicultural trading port, but rather tended to reinforce the divisions between the heritage cultures. The collection policy was thus realigned to focus on art forms that expressed cultural exchanges brought about by trade, migration, and pilgrimage.<sup>2</sup>

Under the leadership of chief curator Pedro Moura Carvalho, and advisors Peter Lee and William R Sargent, the museum created new collections dedicated to trade by acquiring major works of Indian art made for Europe (Figure 2), Chinese export porcelain and silver (Figures 3 and 4), and other hybrid forms. In South Asia, attention was focussed on Sri Lanka, the Himalayas, and ancient Gandhara (Peshawar in present-day Pakistan). This built upon a major collection of Indian cotton textiles made for Southeast Asia that the museum had acquired in 2009. The Peranakan collection was also expanded to include related objects from Jakarta and the Indian Ocean region. In a larger sense, Peranakan culture as a mixed cross-culture entity was used as a means of looking at the rest of Asia. Rather than a late community appendage, the Peranakan Museum is central to the conceptualisation of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

## Success and challenges

At the same time, an analysis of the museum's galleries was conducted. The museum was a major success, and had garnered international attention at the time of its opening, and was well-received by visitors. It was understood that there was no immediate need for revising the galleries, but rather a new overall vision should be articulated, tested in exhibitions and smaller displays, and then implemented in the future.

While the museum told an interesting and immersive story, several problems were noted. The dark and dramatic galleries were engaging for many visitors, but did not permit individual objects to be seen and understood. The screens and projections, ground-breaking when launched, were difficult and expensive to maintain, and quickly became victim to rapid technological change. Surveys of visitors demonstrated high levels of approval, but the design of the galleries did not encourage return or repeat visits. There was also a feeling that the galleries had a single pathway and did not encourage choice. Visitors were led on a controlled path, often in maze-like schemes, through contained sections of the museum. Most visitors failed to visit the ground floor galleries of Indian art, which contained many of the finest objects in the collection.

In more practical areas, it was noted that the restaurant, while generating income for the museum, was almost totally unconnected with the museum as it had an entirely separate entrance. The museum's advisory board felt strongly that the restaurant and café should reinforce the identity the museum, while concurrently drawing new visitors.

## A revised mission

The museum'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". This statement reflected the multiracial nature of Singapore, which was enshrined at the very founding of the Singapore colony in 1819, with the establishment of separate quarters for ethnic groups, and by the multilingual inscriptions on major monuments.

In the early planning stages, the museum was meant to focus on the artistic highpoints of these cultures, that is, to exhibit "the rare arts of East, South, West and Southeast Asia and interpret the cultures which produced these rare arts".<sup>3</sup> But funding was not available in the 1990s to build a major collection, and the museum focused on acquiring representative

cultural examples. The major exception to this was in Indian Hindu and Buddhist sculpture, where the museum was able to acquire world-class objects. The strategy for Chinese art was to encourage loans and eventual gifts from Hong Kong collectors. It was believed that "uncertainties over the handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese" would enable ACM to "attract Hong Kong collectors to part with their collections on a long-term basis".

In the museum's new home at Empress Place, which opened in 2003, the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others scheme was carefully reformulated as geographic regions: East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and West Asia (the "others" being represented by the Arab traders and more generally by Islam of the Middle East). As befits academic and museum practice of the late twentieth century, the focus was on the uniqueness and individuality of the separate cultures.

The arrangement created a number of difficulties, starting with the inaccuracy of the labels. East Asia included only China,<sup>4</sup> while South Asia had scant representation of Sri Lanka and the Himalayas. West Asia is a confusing term that is often taken to mean Turkey and the Holy Land; most residents of the region themselves use the term Middle East. Eventually, this gallery was given the subtitle "Islamic world".

Given the complexities of history and the specific nature of collections, no single scheme can organise any museum's collection. Most museums have used cultures as a means of dividing Asian art, with the exception of Islamic art, which is often a stand-alone section, if not actually a separate institution. The difference is that Singapore is surrounded by these cultures and religions; moreover, institutions dedicated to Malay, Indian, and Chinese heritage already existed or were being planned. And the museum had launched highly successful exhibitions based on international surveys of the spread of Buddhism and the *Ramayana* epic.

In 2013, the board of the ACM approved a revised mission and vision that emphasised the connections between the heritage cultures of



Singapore. While continuing to concentrate on the artistic highpoints of individual cultures, the museum would develop its collection and galleries to help audiences understand the long connections between Asian cultures, and between Asia and the world. Trade, religion, and art would be presented in a broad international context. In addition, the long historical role of Europe in Asia would be integrated into the museum narrative.

This approach was not without controversy, as some stakeholders were reluctant to abandon the standard narrative of separate constituent cultures. Strong endorsement from the advisory board, key funders, and major academic advisors helped the museum launch its new vision. New trends in academic research matched the new vision of the museum; for example, the National University of Singapore in 2013 launched a new Comparative Asian Studies graduate programme. In the planning and design process, the museum received key advice from Peter Lee, Derek Heng, William Sargent, Edmond Chin, and Paravi Wongchicharai.

Equally important as the move away from regional categories was the new emphasis on exploration and self-discovery. The renovated museum would emphasise choice, interactivity, and questions, rather than a strictly defined storyline and set of educational values. The multi-cultural nature of Singapore as a port city which mixed cultures, religions, and languages would be a means of looking at Asian art history generally. New attention would be given to significant cross-roads such as ancient Gandhara, the flow of religions through the Himalayas into China and India, the mixed ports of Goa, Jakarta, Nagasaki, and Guangzhou.

## Experimental initiatives

In preparation for its new galleries, the museum initiated exhibitions and programmes that would test certain key concepts. In 2013, the exhibition *Devotion and Desire: Cross-Cultural Art in Asia* explored inter-regional displays and international religious groupings. The catalogue, written by the curators, deepened these ideas.<sup>5</sup> For example, the exhibition

considered the spread and transformations of religions through Asia, namely Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity through Asia. Some sections examined artistic forms like lacquer that were used in different regions. The project also compared ancestor worship in China and tribal Southeast Asia. This exhibition generated favourable response from visitors, as well as from docents who found the themes helpful to their thematic tours; in addition, the catalogue sold out. The following year, *China Mania* examined trade and competition in ceramics, and the response to world consumer demand.

It should be stressed that not all of the ideas presented in these exhibitions found final form in the museum's permanent collection galleries. Some concepts were fascinating but did not allow for an in-depth exploration of certain themes, such as ancestor worship, where the museum's collection is rich in material from island Southeast Asia. Similarly, the museum lacked the objects to effectively display international developments in urushi lacquer.

The museum also had curatorial responsibility for the Tang Shipwreck from Belitung Island, and presented a special exhibition of the material that emphasised the trading connections with the Middle East, and the exchange of artistic ideas resulting from this. With the new cross-cultural mission of the ACM, it became clear that the Tang Shipwreck Collection, acquired through the generosity of the Estate of Khoo Teck Puat, would make an ideal fit (Figure 5). This ninth-century ship was travelling from China to the Persian Gulf, laden with a cargo of ceramics and valuable works of gold and silver. It represents not only the intense trade between China and the Islamic Middle East, but simultaneously demonstrates the importance of Singapore's region as a pivot point in trade. The story of commerce, art, and international contact would make an ideal beginning for the new galleries of the ACM.

## The new thematic approach

After developing this new vision for the galleries, which included the wing supported by the Hong Leong Foundation, the museum



Figure 5.

Khoo Teck Puat Gallery, with the Tang Shipwreck Collection (acquired through the generosity of the Estate of Khoo Teck Puat), Asian Civilisations Museum. Architecture by GreenhillLi, interior design by FARM; display cases by Click Netherfeld. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

then commissioned a feasibility study for the architectural redevelopment of the building. The National Heritage Board applied for a Reinvestment Fund grant, awarded by the Ministry of Finance in 2014, which allowed the museum to develop a new entrance along the river. This would signal an engagement with the Singapore River, the site of the city-state's port for centuries, and the conceptual basis for the cross-cultural galleries. This matched the scheme of riverside renewal being considered by the Urban Redevelopment Authority. A dramatic set of steps down to the river was positioned directly in front of the new museum entrance, creating a major architectural statement. Coinciding with these developments, archaeological excavations were conducted at Empress Place, between the ACM and Victoria Concert Hall. Highlights from this dig, dating from the fourteenth-century heyday of the Temasek port, would be displayed in the new galleries.

The new museum is organised on two major themes, based on the two main floors of the historic building. The ground floor is dedicated to Trade and the Exchange of Ideas; the second floor is organised around the theme of Religion and Belief, with two galleries sponsored by the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple (Figures 6 and 7). These galleries emphasise the connections and interrelationships between

the cultures of Asia as a way of reflecting the multicultural makeup of Singapore. The galleries hope to dispel the still-common notion that the separate cultures are exceptional, self-contained entities, whereas they were dependent on and combined with each other. Most important, the galleries will stress, as they have in the past, that these cultures have never been fixed.

In addition to these two main themes, more specialised case studies will focus on areas of particular depth in the museum's collection. The third floor will present galleries dedicated to Chinese ceramics (Figure 8) and jewellery from across Asia (2017).

## Architecture and design

The educational principals of openness and self-discovery are underscored by the architectural concept of GreenhillLi, which has emphasised natural light and a clean contemporary design. Preservation requirements meant that new structures had to be separated from the original building by glass. The renovation of the first floor galleries opened historic windows, a process that will be extended on the second floor in 2016 and 2017. Not least, this approach returns attention to the building itself, an important component of Singapore's history. The glazed structures



Figure 6.

Ancient Religions gallery,  
Asian Civilisations  
Museum. Gallery design by  
Henry Yeo. Image courtesy  
of the Asian Civilisations  
Museum.



Figure 7.

The Scholar in Chinese  
Culture. Second floor of  
the Kwek Hong Png Wing.  
Architecture by GreenhillLi,  
interior design by FRD;  
display cases by Click  
Netherfeld. Image courtesy  
of the Asian Civilisations  
Museum.



Figure 8.

Chinese ceramics gallery,  
with display of Dehua  
white ware. Third floor of  
the Kwek Hong Png Wing.  
Architecture by GreenhillLi,  
interior design by FRD;  
display cases by Click  
Netherfeld. Image courtesy  
of the Asian Civilisations  
Museum.



of the two new wings allow visitors to see the historic facades of the building, while the general brightening of the galleries and the elimination of complex interior structures permit appreciation of the columns, archways, and windows of the interior.

The previous galleries presented a highly structured experience that left most visitors with the impression that the museum visit had been completed, and that it needed to be seen only once. This suited tourists but did not encourage repeat visits from residents. Furthermore, most visitors do not flow through a permanent collection in a single fixed stream as they would in a special exhibition meant to give a structured experience of a single topic. Both experienced and new visitors tend to focus on a few areas. The new galleries are designed to be modular, so that visitors can dip into them, and continue to other sections. Audience surveys also indicate that visitors now prefer this approach, which breaks down a large museum into smaller components – digestible stories – rather than a seemingly endless narrative of history or repetitive object types. The reconfiguration also encourages visitors to visit all floors of the museum.

## Learning and media

The revamped museum aims to provide learning experiences that involve discovery and exploration. We believe that the museum should present multiple ways of understanding the past through conversation, multiple perspectives on history, digital media, and special programming. One key to the experience of the new museum is a learning gallery, which will introduce the museum to school groups, families, and first-time visitors.

In the design stage of the museum, it was decided that delivery to personal phones would be our focus. Large-scale interactive devices can be engaging, but they are expensive and can go out of date quickly, so the museum focussed on developing an app and a digital experience, delivered through free and accessible Wi-Fi. The museum's partner in this was the consultant Area360. It was

decided to concentrate resources on media that would reach the widest audience and could be easily expanded. The museum also installed Bluetooth beacons, which allows the app to provide location-specific experiences. The beacons determine the physical location of a visitor's device, and recommend relevant information about objects as a visitor walks through the galleries. This strategy has proved a considerable success since its launch in November 2016, as the app is robust and scalable, and provides a range of information, from curatorial commentary and video interviews to more personal experiences.

The ACM develops its experiences from core content: important objects, many newly acquired, presented in a new and stimulating manner. Distinctive and dramatic objects invite inquiry and appreciation. Interesting combinations and groups should develop those ideas further. The architecture, interior design, and displays cases should reveal these ideas in an unobtrusive way. Natural light can help present these objects, although more controlled lighting is required for certain materials that are sensitive to light.

Museums over the world present their ideas in different ways, and we are thankfully past the stage where institutions felt the need to conform to certain trends and design approaches. The ACM of 2003 was a resounding success that has been echoed and expanded in the new galleries of the National Museum of Singapore, and in the displays of the Indian Heritage Centre and the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. But museums need to remake themselves to respond to shifts in audience needs, growth of the collection, and new ideas that enrich our understanding of the past. With the collaboration of architects Greenhill and gallery designers FARM and FRD, the museum has attempted to refocus attention to the rich stories and complexities of significant works of art.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. Lord Cultural Resources Planning and Management, *National Museum, Singapore: Museum Precinct Master Plan*. Singapore, 1990.
2. Alan Chong, "Introduction" in *Devotion and Desire: Cross-Cultural Art in Asia*. Singapore, 2013, pp. 9–11.
3. Kwa Chong Guan, *Structure and Themes of the Asian Civilisation Gallery in the NM Precinct*. Singapore, 1990.
4. 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 regions. See "Storylines for the Second Wing of the Asian Civilisations Museum", 22 July 1999.
5. *Devotion and Desire: Cross-Cultural Art in Asia*. Exh. cat. Asian Civilisations Museum. Singapore 2013. By Alan Chong, Pedro Moura Carvalho, Clement Onn, et al.