

Re-presenting Southeast Asia: Asian Civilisations Museum

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Southeast Asia is a liminal place, an in-between, hard-to-define almost-continent straddling the maritime trade routes linking the grand civilisations of India and China. It is not quite South nor East, but an uneasy South-East; and for a few brief centuries, even West – regional headquarters to the colonising European powers.

Until very recently, “Southeast Asia” as a term and a geography did not even exist. The region was a nameless backdrop throughout much of antiquity to various fabled polities and regional empires – the Chersonesus Aurea and Suvarnadvipa, Funan and Chenla, Angkor and Bagan, Srivijaya, Majapahit and Nusantara.

When the Europeans swept in with their guns and monopolies, they defined the region in relation to India, variously referring to it as the “East Indies”, or “Farther India”. And then again, it was really only the tiny Spice Islands in the far eastern corner of the almost-continent that initially held their attention. Meanwhile, the Chinese referred generically – and perhaps also a little dismissively – to it during the same period as Nanyang or 南洋, which translates into “oceans to the south”. The actual territory itself, those scattered peninsulas and islands in the oceans to the south, did not even feature in the name.

The geographical boundaries of Southeast Asia are most tangibly circumscribed by way of an extremely recent phenomenon – the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, and the gradual expansion of this multilateral organisation to encompass 10 neighbouring, post-colonial (with the exception of Thailand) nations in 1999.

The boundaries of Southeast Asia are today understood to correspond almost exactly with the collective national boundaries of the ASEAN

bloc, with the nation-states of Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea seeking accession too, and therefore prefiguring a further expansion of said boundaries.

ASEAN, therefore, necessarily and inevitably, grounds any exploration or discussion on the “Southeast Asian”. Certainly, ASEAN, and Singapore’s chairmanship of it in 2018, are the instigating factors behind the “Year of Southeast Asia” initiative at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), which will see the museum focus its exhibitions, conferences, programmes, and other activities on the region from April 2018 to April 2019.

The underlying question ACM will ask is – “What exactly is Southeast Asia?” With ASEAN as a frame, the museum will explore three broad curatorial themes.

First, the idea of a “global Southeast Asia” – a region that played a pivotal rather than peripheral role in global maritime trade and the spread of systems of faith and belief across Asia. This being ACM, the focus, naturally, is on antiquity and the historical, and what new insights they may offer for today. The themes of “Trade” and “Faith” draw reference from Singapore’s own essence as a multicultural, multi-faith port city, and trading hub, and thus we “view” Southeast Asia “through the lens of Singapore”.

This viewing of the region through a Singaporean “lens” lends itself also to the second theme – colonialism and its impact on a post-colonial Southeast Asia. Singapore did not undergo a violent process of decolonisation. Its own treatment of the colonial past can be considered a kind of tacit assimilation, as compared to extremes of violent suppression some of her neighbours had experienced. In Singapore, we are thus more

able to approach and present colonial history in Southeast Asia with some objective distance and neutrality.

The intent in accounting for colonial history is not, however, to reiterate the horrors and demerits of colonialism – there is plenty of literature on that front. As a museum, our intent is instead to objectively examine – through colonial collections of Southeast Asian heritage – the extent to which the colonial gaze, and colonial methods of collecting, categorising, organising, and presenting knowledge continue to impact the way we consider and conceive Southeast Asia today. In typical ACM fashion, we will pay particular attention to cross-cultural, hybrid “East-West” forms of art, material culture, and ways of representation.

Southeast Asia itself consists of a vast diversity of indigenous and migrant people, cultures, and faiths. A third theme, therefore, pertains to the

unabashed celebration of Southeast Asia’s cultural heritage. In the course of our “Year of Southeast Asia”, the museum shall endeavour to throw light upon cultural diversity, even as we find aspects of cultural commonality. Our explorations will range from north to south, east to west, rural to urban, hill tribe to port city. And we will consider the widest possible range of domains – ritual and tradition, visual arts, craft, architecture, textiles, performing arts, as well as food and other aspects of intangible heritage.

The “Year of Southeast Asia” is book-ended by two major exhibitions that explore the above themes from the perspectives of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia respectively.

In April 2018, we presented *Angkor – Exploring Cambodia’s Sacred City*, in collaboration with the Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet in Paris, and as part of a longstanding Singapore-France cultural co-operation project.



Angkor: Exploring Cambodia’s Sacred City, Masterpieces of the Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet installed at the Asian Civilisations Museum. Image courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum.

The exhibition, curated with ACM's cross-cultural mission in mind, places at centre-stage the "East-West" encounter between France and Cambodia in the 19th century.

The first part of the exhibition explores the ways in which Angkor, and Khmer civilisation, were presented to audiences within France and to the rest of the Western world, and features early French photographs, paintings, sketches, architectural plans, books, and plaster casts of Angkor. It suggests that modes of representing Angkor in the colonial era – emphasising adventure, romance, nostalgia, and exoticism – continue to colour how Angkor is perceived and promoted today.

The second part of the exhibition showcases the splendour of Khmer art and the magnificence of

the city of Angkor, inscribed as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage site in 1992. Through a selection of Khmer sculpture and architectural elements from the Guimet's collection, we explore the vision, artistry, and technology of the ancient Khmers, and the artistic legacy of the Khmers in mainland Southeast Asia.

In January 2019, we will present *Raffles* in Southeast Asia, in collaboration with the British Museum and other museum partners in the Netherlands, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This exhibition commemorates the bicentennial of the arrival of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles and the British in Singapore. This time we zoom in on maritime Southeast Asia, specifically the islands of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago.



Angkor: Exploring Cambodia's Sacred City, Masterpieces of the Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet installed at the Asian Civilisations Museum. Image courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum.

The exhibition has three aims. The first is to demystify Raffles, present him as an avid collector of natural and cultural heritage, and explore his influence and legacy on museum collecting in the colonial period and today. The second is to tackle the question of how to re-present, for a contemporary audience, colonial collections of Southeast Asian material that continue to sit at the heart of major museums today, including the ACM. The third, and perhaps most important, is to provide a sweeping history and art history of the cultures of the Malay world.

The core of the exhibition will feature the Raffles Collection from the British Museum – an important collection of mainly Javanese ethnographic material that Raffles personally amassed during his time as Lieutenant-Governor of Java from 1811 – 1815, which he brought back to the United Kingdom. This will be accompanied by a selection of Malaysian and Indonesian material from the Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands, the National Museum of Indonesia, the Sarawak Museum, as well as from ACM, so one gets a fuller picture of collecting in the Malay world.

In between these exhibitions, ACM will re-open new and refreshed permanent galleries in November 2018. The highlight of the new galleries is our *Ancestors and Rituals* gallery, in which we throw the spotlight on Southeast Asian ethnographic material.

One thing all Southeast Asian cultures share is a devotion to ancestors. Ancestors fulfil three main functions. They provide a social position within the community, act as guardian figures for the living, and bring about fertility for future generations. Many rituals and traditions – particularly funerary rites – are related to honouring ancestors, and the ideas behind ancestor worship and ritual

practices are also linked to harvest, rain, and a variety of religious beliefs.

Objects on view, from bronze vessels and wooden sculptures to *kerises* and woven textiles, were meant to be charged with ritual meaning, and thus were produced with great care and artistic skill. Our displays in the gallery aim to marry ritual with art, and provide the visitor with a sense of the complex layers of meaning and artistry behind each and every object.

Elsewhere in the museum, other permanent galleries will be updated such that Southeast Asia features more prominently in each. In our refreshed Maritime Trade galleries, visitors will be able to learn more about the material culture of major Southeast Asian port cities, such as Batavia (Jakarta), Rangoon (Yangon), and Manila, as well as their roles in world trade. In our new “Faith” and “Belief” galleries, the visitor will similarly be able to understand Southeast Asia’s important contribution to the development of styles of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian art.

As part of the permanent gallery launches, ACM will also introduce two special in-museum trails. The first is a *Southeast Asia in the World Trail*, in which visitors will be introduced to some two dozen important objects in the museum that highlight Southeast Asia’s contribution to global trade and the spread of faith. The second trail will be an *ASEAN Trail*, in which ten objects, representing the tangible cultural heritage of each of the 10 member nations of ASEAN, will be featured.

In the meantime, we will be presenting the more intangible aspects of Southeast Asian heritage and culture in a series of festivals and programmes throughout 2018 and early 2019.

The most important of these is the quarterly Asian Cultural and Music Series (ACMS), which will see traditional Southeast Asian performing arts being featured on ACM's riverfront courtyard, against the backdrop of Singapore's contemporary skyline.

The ACMS represents our museum's commitment to celebrating, presenting, and documenting Asian intangible cultural heritage. The Southeast Asian performing arts groups we feature are required to deliver public talks on the basics of their art-form, and all performances and talks are recorded for use in future museum exhibitions or publications.

The implicit message behind presenting traditional performing arts in a highly urban environment against a contemporary backdrop is that cultural heritage can and must have a place in contemporary economic development in Southeast Asia. It is a most important marker of cultural diversity and identity in the region, even as much of the region becomes urbanised and increasingly generic in outlook.

One year is insufficient time for definite answers to the question of "What is Southeast Asia"; a proper exploration would take generations. One thing is for sure – Southeast Asian identity, rooted in Southeast Asian heritage, is complex, shifting, rich, colourful, exuberant, surprising, and sophisticated.

It is not, for even a moment, simple, straightforward, or boring. □

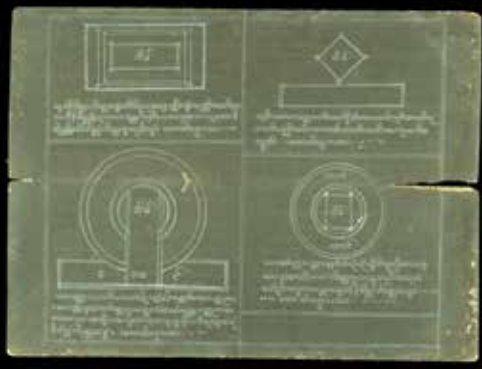
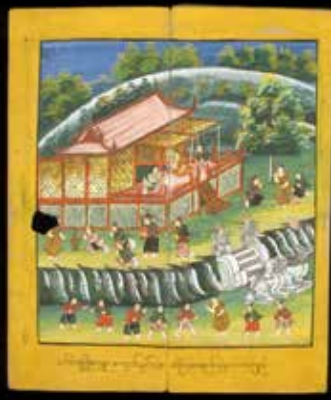
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Ties That Bind As Seen Through National Culture





at Bind – ugh Singapore's Collection



