

be MUSE

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editor's MUSEINGS

However familiar we are with the historical objects around us and in the museums, it's often surprising to learn how the 'same old' things can reveal a world of differences if we care to look at them in a fresh light. History, it could be said, offers an experience that is multi-layered, with many artefacts and architectural legacies displaying on the surface a beauty and majesty many can easily appreciate and enjoy. But if one peels away both the superficial exterior as well as ingrained conceptions in the mind, there is often a whole world to discover in the stories and secrets woven into the fabric of a simple object.

This is a theme that rings true and through much of this issue of *BeMUSE*. For instance, Peter Lee, guest curator for the Peranakan Museum's new exhibition on the *sarong kebaya*, tears down common misconceptions about this Peranakan garment and offers instead a charming tale of the multiple threads (from India and as far as Arabia) that led to the classic combination worn and cherished by Nyonyas today. The echoes of ancient trading routes and their impact on Southeast Asia return later as Clement Onn of the Asian Civilisations Museum offers a first-hand account of the living textile traditions of India's Gujarat state.

In the world of art, Tan Boon Hui, Director of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) dismantles the traditional borders that delineate contemporary art in Southeast Asia. In its place, he offers four propositions that delve into the underlying layers of thought and intention shared by the region's artists as they seek to create works and narratives true to their nature and heritage.

Even the humble piggy bank receives a makeover, as local designers working with SAM turn an evergreen article on its head (in one case, literally!) and draw inspiration from its etymological origins as a simple clay receptacle or 'pygg' for saving money.

The world of heritage offers not only fresh glimpses into the past but also plenty to look forward to in the future. Come 15-31 July, there will much to anticipate and savour as Singapore HeritageFest (SHF) returns. With the theme *Home – What We Love About It*, this edition of SHF invites everyone who calls Singapore home to embark on an expedition of discovery and fun from the heartlands to the hub of the city. Join us then to explore the places and people we cherish across time and space, and rediscover the memories and traditions that tie us together in this home we call Singapore.



MS THANGAMMA KARTHIGESU
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

CONTENTS

10

SARONG KEBAYA

*Peranakan Fashion
And Its International
Sources*

16

4 PROPOSITIONS

*Looking at
Contemporary Art
from Southeast Asia*

50

TOWN WITH A TALE TO TELL

*Joo Chiat bags
Inaugural Heritage
Town Status*

52

SINGAPORE TAKES FLIGHT

*A 100 Years of
Aviation*

62

COPY AFTER COPY

*Some Thoughts
on Authenticating
Chinese Paintings*

70

FROM CRISIS TO FAITH

*Abbas' 45 Years
in Photography*

CONTENTS

34

**DREAM
WEAVERS**
*Exploring Gujarat's
Textile Traditions*

42

**OPEN
HOUSE**
54 Blair Road

05

**MUSE
LIFE**

27

**MUSE
SHOP**

33

**MUSE
CALENDAR**

MUSELIFE



'PAINTING THE FUTURE' WITH GROUND- BREAKING OF THE NATIONAL ART GALLERY

The National Art Gallery officially broke ground at the former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings on 27 January 2011, with Mr Lui Tuck Yew, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, presiding as Guest-of-Honour. Titled *Painting the Future*, the groundbreaking marked the beginning of an estimated 44 months of extensive preservation, remodelling and building works for the two 80 year-old buildings, which will link them together to become the future National Art Gallery, Singapore.

Occupying 60,000 square metres of floor space, the National Art Gallery will be the largest visual arts venue in Singapore when it opens from 2014. The Gallery will house permanent and temporary galleries showcasing local, regional and international works of art, alongside specially designed interactive and programming spaces. It will also feature an open rooftop plaza and garden offering spectacular views of the city, creative art installations, areas for public programmes with mass appeal as well as restaurants and specialty retail shops to cater to visitors from all walks of life.

To attract more visitors to the Gallery, access to selected spaces within the Gallery will be free. These include the Singapore Gallery where artworks by leading local artists over the decades will be showcased; a unique Children's Gallery where young children can engage with art through educational and interactive tools; and the Building History Gallery, which will relate the fascinating stories behind the two historical buildings.

Online debut for National Stamp Collecting Competition

The Singapore Philatelic Museum (SPM) organises the annual National Stamp Collecting Competition (NSCC), which invites primary and secondary school and tertiary students to use philatelic materials and narratives on an exhibit based on a theme of their choice. Students stand to perfect their research, organisational, language and writing skills in the competition. The winners are presented

with certificates and have their entries displayed at a special NSCC exhibition.

In 2010, SPM took the competition one step further by posting the best entries online. Between 22 October and 19 November 2010, netizens voted for their favourite entries and told the museum the reasons behind their choices. SPM received more than 2,200 votes. The 12 most popular entries and the vot-

SPM curates A Journey of Two Nations stamp exhibition in Vientiane, Laos

The Singapore Philatelic Museum (SPM) was proud to curate *Singapore & Laos Stamp Exhibition - A Journey of Two Nations* in Vientiane, Laos from 6-11 December 2010. This was the first time an exhibition on both Singapore and Laos was held in the country. The exhibition, which drew 1,200 visitors, sought to promote a better understanding of the people, culture and history of Singapore and Laos.

His Excellency Khamlout Sidlakone, Chairman of the National Authority of Post and Telecommunications and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, opened the exhibition alongside His Excellency Jeyaraj Benjamin William, Singapore's Ambassador to Laos.

Through stamps and postcards, the exhibition showcased the major historical milestones of the two nations, their people and beliefs, and their culture through traditional costumes, music and dances. There was also a display of traditional costumes from Singapore and a special section on traditional games played by children in both countries such as top spinning and kicking the shuttlecock.

The exhibition was donated to the National Museum in Vientiane for permanent display. The Singapore Embassy in Laos handed the exhibition over to the museum at a ceremony on 12 December 2010.

SAM hosts spouse of Mongolian PM

Mdm Khorloo Otgontuys, spouse of the Prime Minister of Mongolia, Sükhbaataryn Batbold, was hosted at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) by SAM Director Tan Boon Hui on 17 February 2011. Mdm Otgontuys, who was accompanied by Mrs Masagos Zulkifli, spouse of Singapore's Minister of State for Education and Mdm Sim Siew Eng, spouse of Singapore's Ambassador to Seoul and Mongolia, toured the exhibition *Collectors' Stage: Asian Contemporary Art from Private Collections* with SAM Curator Tan Siuli. The hour-long visit ended with a viewing of *Natee Utarit: After Painting* with SAM Curator Michelle Ho.



Heritage takes root in the heart of the community

Joo Chiat has been chosen as Singapore's first Heritage Town. The hunt for the Heritage Town began last October when the National Heritage Board (NHB) issued a nationwide call for submissions to this project, which seeks to support constituencies in taking the lead to promote their heritage and increase heritage heartshare at the community level.

Joo Chiat distinguished itself with an outstanding submission. It featured a remarkable variety of past heritage activities and proposed a range of vibrant activities for 2011, such as an Eurasian Heritage Month and a Peranakan Heritage Month, which involve the participation of community and grassroots organisations as well as community associations.



Speaking at the Heritage Town award presentation ceremony on 19 February 2011, Guest of Honour Mr Lui Tuck Yew, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, said: "By engaging the population – via programming in the heartlands and partnerships to develop heritage content, among others – we strive to promote active participation and ownership of heritage. We hope the community can connect with one another, and be part of Singapore's heritage." Mr Chan Soo Sen, Member of Parliament for Joo Chiat Constituency, said: "We are honoured to be awarded the distinction of being Singapore's first Heritage Town. NHB's recognition and funding will be a great encouragement for us to continue sharing our treasured heritage through developing innovative and enriching activities that showcase Joo Chiat's multi-faceted legacy to our people."



ESPLANADE PARK MEMORIALS AND SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL JOIN LINE-UP OF NATIONAL MONUMENTS

The former Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House (now the Singapore Conference Hall), and the Esplanade Park Memorials comprising the Lim Bo Seng Memorial, Tan Kim Seng Fountain and Cenotaph were gazetted as National Monuments on 28 December 2010. This brings the number of Singapore's National Monuments to 63. Built to commemorate significant events and individuals in Singapore's history, these National Monuments were selected for their architectural merit and social-historical significance that spans the different communities in Singapore. The Singapore Conference Hall celebrates Singapore's self-governance and independence, while the Esplanade Park Memorials recognise the contributions of noteworthy individuals from all walks of life.

Stated Ms Jean Wee, Director of the Preservation of Monuments Board: "With the Singapore Conference Hall, it is the first time we are gazetting a post-colonial building. Previous gazettes served to mark the architectural heritage of pre-independent Singapore. The former Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House was chosen as its history is closely intertwined with Singapore's path towards independence in 1965. The gazette of smaller structures such as the Lim Bo Seng Memorial, Tan Kim Seng Fountain and Cenotaph is significant as well as they allow us to commemorate the lives of notable individuals who contributed to the community and Singapore as a whole."



National Museum of Singapore welcomes Austrian President

Austrian President Heinz Fischer and his wife, together with an official delegation comprising Minister for European and International Affairs Dr Michael Spindelegger, Minister of Health Mr Alois Stöger, Minister for Science and Research Dr Beatrix Karl, members of the Austrian Parliament and senior officials, visited the National Museum of Singapore on 22 February 2011. Representatives of Austrian cultural and educational institutions also accompanied President Fischer. Mr Lim Swee Say, Minister, Prime Minister's Office, and Mrs Lim represented the Singapore delegation. This is President Fischer's first official visit to Singapore and to the Museum.

Led by Lee Chor Lin, Director of the National Museum of Singapore, and Iskander Mydin, Deputy Director of Curations and Collections, President Fischer was given an introduction to the Museum's history and architecture, followed by a guided tour to the Singapore History Gallery. The visit ended with a photo opportunity and gift exchange between President Fischer and Lee Chor Lin.

MUSEGALLERY

MELLA JAARSM
SHAGGY
2006

INSTALLATION WITH HAIR AND HAIR CURLERS

Mella Jaarsma's artistic practice challenges simplistic categorisation, as reflected in her own background. Her Dutch upbringing and decision to work in the historical Javanese city of Yogyakarta for more than twenty years place her in a unique situation, an insider/outsider slipping in and out of the tensions of her environment. The co-founder of Indonesia's foremost contemporary art institution, Cemeti Art House, Mella is best known for her costume installations which use various materials such as animal skins, horns and even military clothing – items charged with the metaphorical potencies of race, identity, human nature, sexuality, beliefs, politics and origins.

In *Shaggy*, Mella takes on the symbol of women's hair – with all its attendant associations with eroticism, gender stereotypes and identity. While this piece originated as the artist's commentary on how our contemporary obsession with image and conformity with fashion 'trends' result in a loss of individuality and a dehumanising sameness, it also makes a powerful statement about the Indonesian woman's obsession with hair (and by extension, the universal vanity of women and their anxiety to preserve their beauty), transforming something conventionally 'feminine' and alluring into a work of monstrous proportions.



SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM
COLLECTION

MUSEGALLERY

LETI ANCESTOR IMAGE IN SQUATTING MAN POSE
WOOD, MOTHER-OF-PEARL
EARLY 20TH CENTURY
LETI, SOUTHWEST MALUKU ISLANDS

H37.5 x W12.7 x D13.5 cm

The squatting man is one of the predominant poses in Austronesian ancestral woodcarvings and can be found throughout the Austronesian migration zone, particularly in the Philippines and in the eastern half of the Indonesian Archipelago. Given its widespread use, the squatting man pose almost certainly dates back to the origins of the migration which spread Austronesian influence across much of island Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands beginning roughly five to seven thousand years ago.

This particular image would originally have been mounted as the focal point of an elaborate "altar" where it was the subject of ancestor veneration ceremonies.

Leti, a small and extremely remote island in the Moluccas, was formerly important as a source of nutmeg and mace during the heyday of the famous spice trade.

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM
COLLECTION



MUSEUMS

SARONG KEBAYA

*Peranakan Fashion
And Its International
Sources*

4 PROPOSITIONS

*Looking at
Contemporary Art
from Southeast Asia*

PERANAKAN FASHION &
ITS INTERNATIONAL SOURCES

Sarong Kebaya

Now more than ever, the image of a woman in a *sarong kebaya* resonates with the Singaporean public – from the iconic Singapore Girl to the Little Nyonya of primetime TV and even to the blown-up images of Ivan Heng as the sultry Emily Gan in *Emily of Emerald Hill*. The *sarong kebaya*, a tubular batik skirt worn with a fitted blouse, is still proudly worn by Peranakan women – Nyonyas – in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar. The diverse influences that led to this enduring garment are traced in a new exhibition at the Peranakan Museum.



By Peter Lee

The early 20th century was the golden age of the Peranakan *sarong kebaya*, and in recent years the garment has experienced a major revival. Yet perhaps at no other moment has the *sarong kebaya* been so misunderstood. One of the most arresting images of Mediacorp's hit television series *Little Nyonya*, set between the 1930s and the 1950s, was of the protagonist cooking up a feast in the kitchen. Simply but immaculately dressed in a *sarong kebaya*, she wore her hair neatly pulled up into a chignon. However, during that period, unmarried girls did not wear an expensive and delicate *sarong kebaya* into the kitchen, and chignons were only sported by their mothers and grandmothers, while they themselves preferred modern short crops, crimps and perms. And most of the batik *sarongs* shown in the series are of a type popular only in the late 1950s and 1960s. Such anachronisms are common – and have arisen because of the dearth of information on Peranakan fashion. A new exhibition at the Peranakan Museum from 1 April 2011 to 26 February 2012 aims to fill in the gaps.

Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion and its International Sources presents the historical and stylistic phases of the Peranakan *sarong kebaya* from the 1800s to 1950s. It reveals fascinating aspects about the origins of both components of the costume over five centuries. On display are 131 objects, including 58 outfits presented in chronological sequence. Many of the cloths and *kebayas* belong to types that have never been published before, including rare treasures from the Peranakan Museum, from the collection of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee, and from three Dutch museums: the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden.

DISTANT ORIGINS

The exhibition begins with rare textiles from the 16th to 19th centuries that reveal the history of skirt cloths and *sarongs*. Some of these ancient patterns can still be found on batiks worn today. The ports of maritime Asia had long been dynamic centres of exchanges between cultures. One medium of cultural contact was cloth. By the 16th century, Indian textiles from Gujarat and the Coromandel Coast were extremely popular commodities used by Arab, Indian and European traders to barter for spices from the Malay archipelago. Although *sarong* is a term used nowadays to describe any kind of wrapped skirt, it is in fact a long cloth sewn into a tube (*sarung* means 'sheath' in Malay). Early examples of wrapped skirts and ceremonial cloths, as well as the earliest documented *sarong* made from an Indian textile, are among the treasures on display.

Two key types of garments are introduced. The prototypical *kebaya* is a long

loose jacket derived from the ancient *qaba*, an Islamic robe worn at least since the 9th century by rulers across the Middle East, Central Asia and northern India. By the 17th century it had become a common garment worn by both men and women of the elite classes across the region. Even the Brahmins of Calicut (now Kozhikode in Kerala, India) wore a long white gown called a *cabaye*, 'of very white cotton, reaching to the heels'.¹ Variant spellings include *cabaia*, *kabai* and *kabay*. However, in the 19th century, this robe was called a *baju panjang* ('long robe' in Malay) in Malacca, and was worn by Peranakan women until the early 20th century. The other key robe is the *baju*, a hip- or knee-length tunic with a V-shaped opening for the head. This is derived from the *bazu*,

another ancient Islamic garment. In the 17th century it was common all over the Indian Ocean and the Malay archipelago, and worn by men and women, including the women of the first Eurasian communities in the Portuguese colonies of Goa and Malacca, and even in the Spice Islands further east. European travellers noticed that women wore a *baju* "so fine that you may see all their body through it".² Another traveller noted that the *baju* worn by noblewomen in the court of Banten in Java were "so lightly executed that their embroidery does not hinder one from perceiving their naked bodies."³ This tropical engagement with see-through fabric endured till the 20th century.

EARLY NYONYA 'BAJUS'

The earliest group of costumes worn by Peranakan women in the exhibition dates to the late 19th century and shows the evolution of Nyonya fashion, starting with the sombre hues of the staid *baju panjang* and plaid *sarong*. By the 1910s, women wore bright and transparent European organdies (worn for modesty over a high-necked, long-sleeved white blouse) together with expensive hand-drawn batik *sarongs* imported from Chinese workshops on the north coast of Java. The Chinese had been involved with batik-making

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Facing page: *Kebaya* – Europe, tailored in Indonesia, ca. 1930-1950. Cotton (machine-made net and embroidery). Peranakan Museum, Gift of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee. Skirt Cloth (*Kain panjang pagi-sore*) – Java, Kedungwuni, 1930-1950. Signed: Oey Soe Tjoen. Cotton (hand-drawn batik). Peranakan Museum, Collection of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee.



at least since the late 18th century. Production was mostly low quality and by the early 19th century, large quantities of batik handkerchiefs and shoulder cloths were exported to the Straits Settlements. The finest hand-drawn cloths were produced in limited numbers for wealthy patrons in Semarang and Lasem, at the north coast of Java. It was not until the second half of the 19th century that the production of high quality batiks reached quantities large enough for export to Singapore and the region.

By the 1930s, the combined *baju panjang* and *sarong* was a riot of colour, especially because the batik *sarongs* were able to match the vibrant hues of the imported organdies after chemical dyes were introduced from Germany. In Singapore, the organdie was called *kasa*, after a centuries-old trade term for fine gauzes. The Nyonyas added their own flavour to the term, referring to it as *kasa gelair* ('glass-like organdie') after its translucent quality.

LACE: THREADING EAST AND WEST

In the 18th century, colonial women in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) added lace to their long *kebayas*, which they wore with voluminous skirts or *saias* made of hand-drawn Indian cloths. The word for lace in many languages of the region is derived from the Portuguese term *renda*, entering even the Peranakan Fujian dialect spoken in Penang, where lace is termed *lianla*.

By the mid-19th century this fashion was widespread throughout the colonies, and dressing in a white lace *kebaya* with an expensive cotton batik *sarong* became a status symbol among European and Eurasian women in the Dutch colony. During this time, European female entrepreneurs in Semarang and Pekalongan in Java began producing high quality batiks to satisfy the huge demand. Taking on many traditional patterns from the old Indian textiles worn by their ancestors a century before, they added

many innovative design features to create a whole new genre, today called *batik Belanda* ('Dutch batik' in Malay). Dutch women's journals advised that a lady living in the colonies required three dozen *kebayas* and at least a dozen *sarongs*. There were *kebayas* specifically for day and night, the latter being less elaborate. On their long sea journeys from the Netherlands to the Indies, women switched from Western dress to *sarong kebaya* after their ship passed Port Said.⁴

The *sarong kebaya* was a costume disparaged by many European travellers. One author described it as an outfit that was "the only practical morning dress, because it can be easily changed two or three times a day – which is becoming to so few; the way the sarong falls straight in the back is particularly angular and ugly, however elegant and expensive the costume".⁵

FROM EMULATION TO ASSERTION

Some time around 1900, Nyonya women in the Dutch East Indies began to abandon the long and loose *kebaya* or *baju panjang*, and opted instead for the elegant and contoured European white lace *kebaya* and floral *sarong*, a fashion they exported to the Straits Settlements. Even at that time, the costume was totally misunderstood. A resident of Kuala Lumpur, in a lively debate on the *sarong kebaya* organised by the Selangor Chinese Literary and Debating Society in 1904, described the outfit as "an imitation borrowed from the Malay". The *kebaya* was "not graceful, nor neat" and the vulgarity of the *sarong* was "beyond question", making the Nyonya "a disgrace to modern civilisation".⁶

Such criticisms were ignored, since for the next fifty years, the *sarong kebaya* was the hallmark of Nyonyas in the region. On the other hand, the European women they were emulating stopped wearing the *sarong kebaya* completely, preferring the modern fashions of the Jazz Age. This period might be regarded as the high point of the Peranakan *sarong kebaya*. Peranakan women soon added elements that expressed their own identity. *Kebayas* became increasingly elaborate, and the introduction of the Singer sewing machine lifted imitation lace to astounding levels. Fields of meticulous lace-like work, impossible to achieve with real lace, resulted in *kebayas* that were breathtaking, cross-cultural works of art. In

the 1930s, the finest examples were made from pale cotton voiles, complementing the absurdly complex batiks made in Chinese-owned ateliers in small towns on Java's north coast. They produced unique pieces for wealthy clients; the batiks were so precious that retailers kept them in safes until buyers were found.

In January 1930, the British textile manufacturer Tootal trademarked their signature cotton voile known as Robia, and by April of the same year it was advertised for sale in Singapore at Whiteaway, Laidlaw & Co.⁷ Among Nyonyas, this name became synonymous with the voile used for *kebayas*, and has deep nostalgic resonance for many Peranakans today.

Towards the middle of the century, the colours of the *sarong* and *kebaya* became increasingly vivid and intense. After the war, the prohibitive expense of lace and the desire for stronger hues and dramatic modern patterns resulted in *kebayas* with larger motifs and *sarongs* drenched in contrasting colours.

To the wearers, the costume was a very private indulgence. Like many luxuries, the finest aspects of workmanship and quality were expressed in details that were hidden when worn. For much of this golden age, the *sarong kebaya* was an outfit for the home, important family occasions and visits to the residences of close friends and relatives. When a nyonya had to put on a public face – at colonial events or occasions when there would be people of other communities – she frequently preferred the Chinese cheongsam. However, with over 50 examples on display at the Peranakan Museum, the iconic *sarong kebaya* will finally get nudged back into the limelight.



Peter Lee is Guest Curator of 'Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion and its International Sources'.

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Endnotes:

1. *The Voyage of François Pyrard*, translated by Albert I Gray, vol. 1 (London, 1890), p. 372.
2. Arthur Coke Burnell, ed., *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies* (London, 1885), vol. 1, p. 206.
3. Jean de Lacombe, *A Compendium of the East, 1681*, translated by Stephanie and Denis Clark (London, 1937), p. 65.
4. Dorine Bronkhorst, *Tropenocht: Indische en Europese kleding in Nederlands-Indië* (The Hague, 1996), pp. 26, 29.
5. Louis Couperus, *The Hidden Force* (Singapore, 1992), p. 75.
6. *The Straits Times*, 12 April 1904, p. 4.
7. <http://trade.mar.cx/AU55158> [trademark filed on 28 January 1930]. *The Singapore Free Press & Mercantile Advertiser*, 14 April 1930, p. 6.

Top left: *Baju Panjang* – North coast of Java (tailored in Penang, Malacca, or Singapore), late 19th to early 20th century. Cotton (block-printed batik). Peranakan Museum, Gift of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee. *Sarong* – Java, Lasem, late 19th to early 20th century. Cotton (hand-drawn batik). Collection of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

Top right: *Kebaya* – Europe, tailored in Indonesia, ca. 1880-1920. Silk (machine-made lace). Peranakan Museum, Gift of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee. *Sarong* – Java, Pekalongan, ca. 1880-1920. Signed: Lien Metzelaar. Cotton (hand-drawn batik). Collection of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

Bottom right: *Kebaya* – Europe, tailored in Indonesia, ca. 1910-1920. Cotton (machine-made net and lace). Peranakan Museum, Gift of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee. *Sarong* – Java, Sidoarjo, ca. 1920-1925. Signed: Tan Sin Ing. Cotton (hand-drawn batik). Collection of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

Bottom left: *Kebaya* – Cotton (machine-stitched embroidery), ca. 1945-1955. Peranakan Museum, Gift of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee. Skirt cloth (*Kain panjang pagi-sore*) – Java, Kedungwuni, ca. 1950-1960. Signed: Na Swan Hien. Collection of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

By Tan Boon Hui

It is often easier to describe contemporary art from Southeast Asia within the bounded borders of the nation-state than it is to talk of regional features and impulses. One can recognise Indonesian art from Filipino, Malaysian or Vietnamese but is hard pressed to say anything about what connects them. Part of the problem seems to be that the localised subject matter, especially with painting, is often the most obvious sign of their origins. The strong figurative tradi-

tion, with its profusion of colours and images, is often the most aggressive marker of regional art. Unfortunately, this is less useful for considering the commonalities of contemporary art across the region and rather serves to further cement the borders that separate artistic practices between art producing communities.

“(A)RT IS OF ABSOLUTELY NO USE FOR THE MASSES.” CLAUDE DEBUSSY

no one but itself, not God, country or bourgeoisie. “I don’t know who said it, I don’t know where,” he wrote, “that literature and the arts influence morality. Whoever he was, he was doubtless a great fool... (all) that the arts produce is beauty.” Putting the nail on the coffin of utility, he stated that “Nothing is truly beautiful, but what can never be of use to anything. Everything that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need and human needs are ignorable and disgusting, like men’s poor and feeble nature. The most useful place in a home is the latrine.”¹ Hyperbole aside, Gautier’s statements exemplify the defining attitude of the late 19th century modernists, that the artist, and art by definition, was responsible to no one and nothing, except himself and herself (artists included!).

The social purpose of art has always been a feature of modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia. By this I do not mean art as an edifying feature to ameliorate the unsavoury aspects of life, nor as a pleasantry. While the ‘modern’ could be seen as the broad adoption of a new stance on tradition,

PROPOSITION 1: Art must have purpose for society

The notion of art for art’s sake has never really taken hold in the region. Instead,

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Natee Utarit, *The Western Light 1*, 2006, oil on canvas, 200 x 180 cm, Singapore Art Museum Collection.



PROPOSITIONS

// LOOKING AT CONTEMPORARY ART FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

a strong body of scholarship over the past decade has demonstrated the diversity of modernisms in the world, in the way each historical community and culture has encountered these ideas and absorbed them creatively into their own cosmologies and ideal structures for their own causes. As John Clark has argued, “Modernity often means reformulating (one’s) habitual cultural forms through their relativisation by reference

of modernity, of the impending time of their entry into all that meant being part of a new world coming into being. In the Philippines, Félix Resurrección Hidalgo’s *Christian Virgins Being Exposed to the Populace*, a painting in the academic realist style that won the silver medal in the 1884 Madrid Exposition, became seen as an allegory to the humiliating exploitation of the native peoples by Spanish colonists.

often the most powerless. While appearing similar at first glance, the manual labour that has shaped each clay head has produced unique individuals endowed with a humble humanity seeping through individual gaping mouths and holes for eyes. While they amass in numbers, a sense of powerlessness is palpable as the heads are disconnected from each other and have no body to actualise their will⁶. This work, *Kekerasan I* (or *Violence I*)

Art for art’s sake has never really taken hold in the region. Instead, the relationship of the art object to the context of its production and the social purpose of art have been a marked feature in Southeast Asia through the beginnings of modern art.

to a cultural other.”² The main goals of such adoptions were to critique colonialism and to stimulate the creation of a national consciousness, leading to independence. These modern stances were mainly led by the literate elites who had access to such ideas and resources. In Singapore, pioneer artists included Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, Georgette Chen and Lim Cheng Hoe, with the last-named the only one who did not have a formal art education.³ The other painters worked within the tradition of literati or ‘scholar’ artists. In creating paintings that would come to be called the ‘Nanyang Style’, these pioneer artists sought to find *local relevance* for their work by focusing on *local subject matter*.

Much earlier, in the court of King Rama IV, the Thai court painter Khrua Inkong created striking temple murals that used chiaroscuro (strong contrasts of light and dark shades) and Western perspective. His paintings were undoubtedly popular among his elite audiences, who did not mind that he was painting a world that he only knew through pictures in Western postcards. Instead, he captured the desires of a Thai upper class dreaming

But what then of art after the contemporary turn, when independence had been achieved? One of the main aesthetic tendencies of art in the region has been what Jim Supangkat calls its “moral aesthetic”. In an essay on modern art in Yogyakarta, he argues that “(i)ts centre of gravity is placed on defending those on the losing side – people who are oppressed, treated unjustly or abused. It stems from critical observation of the practices of authority that is not based on conceptualising or seeking remedy, but more on feelings of sympathy or empathy.”⁴ Supangkat notes that in Yogyakarta, one of the main centres of Indonesian art practice, the linking of art to tradition and dealing with socio-political problems have continued into the contemporary turn.⁵

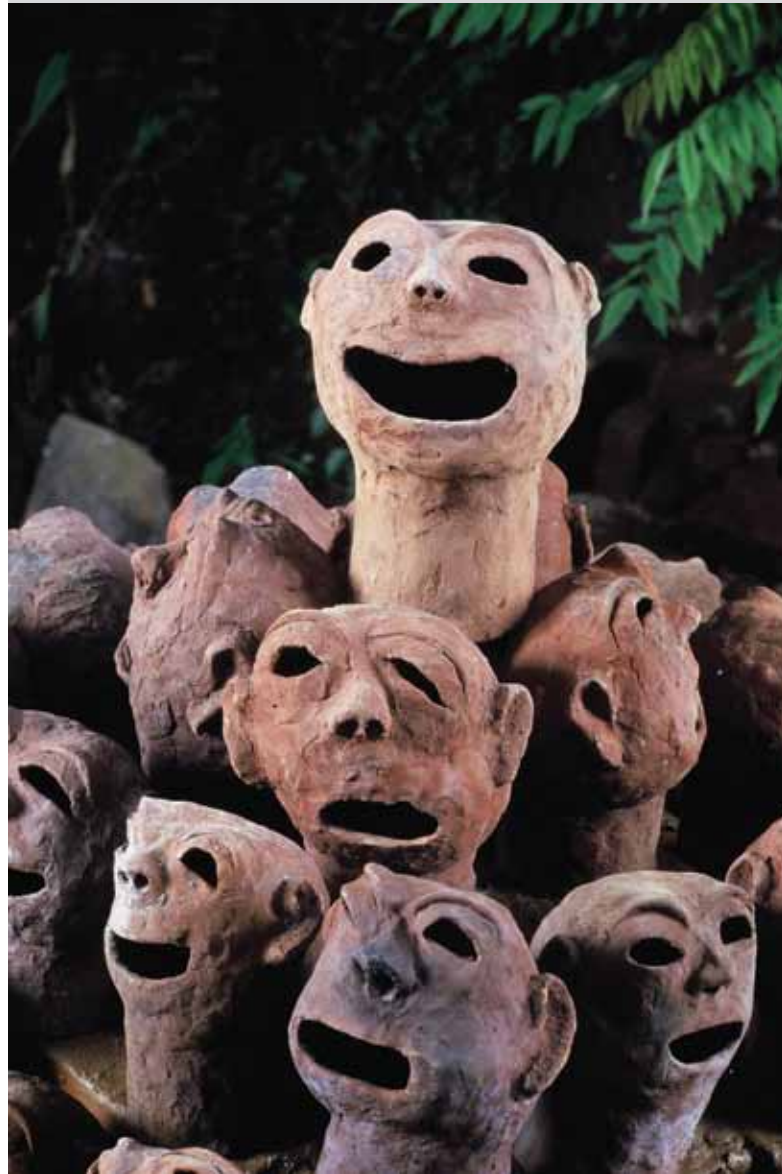
Let us examine more closely two examples. A 3-metre high pyramidal structure lies on the ground, its tiers populated by hundreds of bald human heads, hand-shaped out of low-fire clay – a cheap, friable material associated with the Javanese soil and lowly peasants who work the earth. The pyramid recalls the stupas of classical Java but also reminds us of the stratified and hierarchical nature of Indonesian society, where farmers are

was created in 1995 by Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto, whose works from the 1990s are often powerful commentaries on injustice and potential violence in his native land during the contentious years leading to the end of the Suharto regime.

This work, in the collection of the Singapore Art Museum, is the first and most exhibited of the four *Kekerasan* installations, one of the most compelling series of works from the region and created using clay and terracotta, often with the help of brickmakers and earthenware artisans from the village of Bantul in Yogyakarta⁷. By aligning himself with the lower class artisans and workers of the soil, Christanto uses his clay heads as representations of the tragic fates of the silent victims of his time.⁸ If justice is not to be found, Christanto’s work is content to seek our empathy and evoke our sense of morality.

Like Christanto, Thai artist Montien Boonma has used local materials in his installations and sculptures. While he is most well-known for installations that draw upon his Buddhist faith, the sculpture *Venus of Bangkok* demonstrates

how new ideas have often been transformed in ways that made sense within the existing context of the region. The ideas of conceptualism and use of found material have been absorbed into this artwork. Scrap metal, strips of wood and a red plastic pail have been assembled to form what resembles a kneeling figure. The materials are humble, and in fact, look like remnants of discarded household items. The sculpture, through its ironic title, is a painful reminder of the countless young women who seek a better life in the big cities but end up as sex workers. When Marcel Duchamp trotted forth his infamous latrine, he was looking over the horizon at the delinking of the ‘handmade’ skills of art making from the artist’s intentions, which he considered the true heart of art practice. The artist’s intentions and not any formal properties of the art work became the primary marker of art⁹. With *Venus of Bangkok*, however, the purpose was less to critique the art system or navigate around the elitist position of art and artist. Instead this sculpture serves to communicate the complex human costs of rapid urbanisation and the lure of the monetary economy. As Shioda Junichi states: “Marble would not be appropriate



Dadang Christanto, *Kekerasan I* (Violence I), 1995, fired clay, wood, 300 x 300 x 300 cm, Singapore Art Museum Collection.



Marine borders are invisible and the region's seas more often than not unite and draw people together than separate and mark differences. *Sulu Stories* (2005) by Yee I-Lann marks the intersection of two polities – Malaysia and Indonesia. The twelve images in this emblematic series have the horizon as a constant, a dividing line between sky and sea that yet obliterates difference.



'The Archipelago' from Yee I-Lann, *Sulu Stories*, 2005, 13 digital prints on Kodak paper, variable dimensions, edition 2 of 8, Singapore Art Museum Collection.

for the *Venus of Bangkok*; refuse is more fitting. This is not a superficial aping of Western contemporary art since the artist is obviously working deliberately within a Thai context, dealing with a situation which is very real for him."¹⁰

2

PROPOSITION 2: The persistence of narrative and use of story-telling

At a recent discussion at the Singapore Art Museum, the Singapore-based lecturer/painter Milenko Prvacki commented on the feeling of strangeness he felt when he first came to Southeast Asia from Europe and encountered the overwhelmingly figurative art of the region. The relative paucity of abstract painting was noticeable and this trend has grown amid the latest art market boom that further enlarged the collector base for painting, specifically figurative painting.

Figuration ultimately has its roots in narrative, one of the enduring features of Southeast Asian cultural expression even in the classical period. The power of icons and image-making in the constitution of Southeast Asian polities has been supported by a wealth of historical and anthropological research.¹¹ Before the formation of the modern nation state, rulers focused less on policing their borders and instead concentrated their energies on drawing resources, specifically human labour, to the centre where the ruler was. Clifford Geertz's notion of the theatre state suggests the crucial role of visual expression and visual performance through the body by the centre in constituting the Southeast Asian polity. Image-making, which reached a peak in the Hindu-Buddhist civilisations of classical Java before the fall of Majapahit

and continued to thrive in the Buddhist kingdoms of the Mainland, were layerings upon indigenous cultures with a vibrant oral tradition. Storytelling and narrative were the ways in which rulers and cultures spoke of their world and the place of people in those worlds to a largely illiterate populace. One of the two most famous structures (the other being the Khmer Angkor Wat) from the classical period, Candi Borobudur in Central Java, has lower level galleries covered by narrative reliefs, 1,300 panels with a total length of 8,200 metres, that tell of the life of Buddha and upper level galleries that depict the pilgrimage of the acolyte Sudhana in search of the ultimate truth.¹² The importance of narrative as a communicative strategy has persisted into the coming of modern and contemporary art.

In 2006, when a political crisis led to the end of the government of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, artist Natee Utarit painted his work *The Western Light I* and *II*. *The Western Light I* was among his first works to address social and political issues. The painting features King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), a revered monarch and reformer whose astute political strategems helped Thailand maintain her independence from colonial rule. Utarit's painting features a famous equestrian statue of the King, commissioned in 1908 and towering over Bangkok's Royal Plaza. However, the artist has painted the image from a

contemporary toy version of the real statue. Painted in a foreboding dark blue palette in contrast to the actual monument, the King leads the way towards the West and the modern world. In the companion piece, *The Western Light II*, the rider faces away from the viewer, as if contemplating the dream from that historical moment¹³. Utarit seems to ask of the viewer whether that blazing destiny envisaged was ever achieved.

The persistence and desire for art to communicate a narrative has in fact been a main factor behind the flourishing of realist and especially figurative painting in Southeast Asian contemporary art. The death of painting makes no sense in the region because one cannot imagine the end of narrative. One serves to constitute the other.

The art works described earlier demonstrate how the adoption of specific genres like installation has to be seen also in terms of how regional artists have drawn upon genres, materials and techniques that best suited their specific circumstances. This promiscuity of forms, materials and styles means that some artists often profitably use certain genres and materials without fully realising or considering as critical the original context of that genre. In 1975, the Indonesian artist FX Harsono created *Paling Top '75* (*The Most Top '75*), an installation of a toy AK-47 rifle in a wooden crate with a

wire covering – basically cheap materials used for keeping livestock. The work is a powerful statement against the violence that persists in contemporary society. As a commentator stated, “[The] reluctance to be didactic is absent from Harsono’s artistic activities. He wants his works to be didactic.”¹⁴

Asked if he was referencing specific artistic ideas, Harsono stated, “At the time it didn’t cross my mind that these were readymade or found objects. Neither was I thinking of Duchamp, although I knew of him. My focus at the time was how presenting new forms [can] raise social issues using visual elements from day-to-day life, with the idea that: (1) daily objects (without changing their meaning) would easily be understood by observers, so they would be more communicative; 2) daily objects are visual objects that cannot be identified as a form of fine art; and 3) daily objects can represent the spirit of experimenting and playing around.”¹⁵ Harsono’s response paints a picture, so to speak, of art created in a space of transculturation, where selective reading (including not reading certain aspects) of received ideas originating from without generates wholly new meanings and artistic practices that turn the artist into an active cultural agent “able to generate new relationships, in particular between the audience and the content of his/her work.”¹⁶

PROPOSITION 3: Migration and the dilemmas of identity

For a long time, the movement of people, products and ideas has helped constitute the complex mix of cultures in the region. Migration and its cultures have been a major theme of contemporary art in Southeast Asia. An artist whose biography mirrors the fluid nature and constant movement that characterises the region, Simryn Gill was born in Singapore, grew up in Malaysia and now works between Australia and Malaysia. Her installation *Washed Up* consists of 2,000 glass shards found literally washed up on beaches in the archipelago. Each shard bears an English word such as ‘symbolic’, ‘grasses’ and ‘play’. Gill remarks, “I was interested in the ways language leaves

one place and arrives in another and, although the written form is the same, something happens to it and the meanings of the words change.”¹⁷ The shards are leftovers, fragments from another life and another place that we can only guess at. The engraved words also sardonically denote how the English language has been washed up, through an accident of history, and left as a heritage in countries like Singapore and Malaysia.

In Gill’s photographic series, *Standing Still*, the reality that the region’s openness also renders it vulnerable to external debilitating forces is made manifest in the urban landscape of Malaysia. Shot from 2000-2003, the 114 photographs document buildings in various stages of decay and destruction. Not all the buildings are old; some are recent developments – large scale housing developments, shopping centres and private homes – victims of an economic crisis at the end of the 1990s. No people are captured, but the photographs still evoke the lingering effects of human presence. An earlier series, *A small town at the turn of the century*, sees Gill returning to her childhood community at Port Dickson, assuming the role of intrepid anthropologist. She photographs the townsfolk in their daily lives but her subjects’ faces are obscured by masks of tropical fruits: rambutan, jackfruit, pineapple, bananas etc. Seemingly witty and wry, these photographs also incite a guessing game as to who the ‘fruithead’ subjects are, their economic and family background and most tellingly in the context of Malaysia, their ethnicity which can now only be read not through the colour of their skin, but through the paraphernalia that surrounds them in each photograph.

The recent work of Jompet Kuswidananto is haunted by the ghosts of his native Java’s syncretistic culture. Java is an island where the ‘grand’ traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have been absorbed, contested, recontextualised and co-exist. The resulting blend has become the engine that drives Javanese civilisation, according to Jompet, whose installation *Java’s Machine: Phantasmagoria* (2008), is a visual expression of this synthesised blend.

Now in the Singapore Art Museum collection, this haunting installation features a band of soldiers, whose presence is physicalised by their uniforms – a mix of Javanese and Dutch military attire. Through the magic of electronics, each ‘figure’ plays a different sound, which collectively merges into an orchestral ‘score’, whose clashing rhythms and harmonies sound oddly melodious – a symbol of the sedimented collage of cultural ideas that is Java. In this work, the syncretism of Java attempts to reconcile the clash of native and foreign ideas, like the discordant harmonies produced by the soldiers. From the 18th century onwards, Dutch colonisation meant that Javanese court armies no longer went into battle; instead, their role became symbolic. The installation’s choice to mark the presence of the soldiers by their attire alone is a sign of the ambivalence that characterises this work.

The fluid, slippery nature of identity and culture in the region is often a consequence of the presence of the sea. Marine borders are invisible and the region’s seas more often than not unite

and draw people together than separate and mark differences, an issue raised by Yee I-Lann in *Sulu Stories* (2005). The Sulu Sea marks the intersection of two polities – Malaysia and Indonesia. Yee’s emblematic series have the horizon as a constant, a dividing line between sky and sea that yet obliterates difference. In this ocean of sameness, it is features like the Bahala cliffs in Sandakan (depicted in the image ‘The Archipelago’) or Mount Tumatangis in ‘Awn Hambuuk Sultan’ that serve as physical markers for the travellers and dwellers of the region. Above all, it is the shared stories of the sea that unite the communities and histories of these waters stretching all the way to the Philippines. Yee writes, “Whilst in the Philippines I was constantly asked, ‘Where are you from?’. ‘I am from Sabah,’ I would answer. ‘Ah, a Filipina’ was the common response. I smile but am thinking; difficult surf, troubled waters, dive in the deep end, not drowning, waving... But I am welcomed with a knowing embrace; we know we are connected; our histories, fate and horizon line is shared.”¹⁸ *Sulu Stories* also highlights the particularly Sabahan locale from which

the artist originates and with which she identifies herself.

Human migration in the region and its effects on culture and identity are expressed with humour and wryness by Navin Rawanchaidul’s sculpture *Where Is Navin?* A Thai citizen of South Asian descent who speaks the northern Thai dialect fluently, Navin’s darker skin and curly hair set him apart physically from other Thais, who often refer to Indians as *khaek*, meaning stranger or guest, implying that the person is not a Thai. Migration has brought many cultures and communities together in the same geographical space; however, migrant communities often have to choose between assimilation or maintaining difference, with the result sometimes an uncertain mix of the two. *Where Is Navin?* expresses the contradictions that can occur using the artist’s own biography as a source material. In an interview, he has said: “I live in Thailand, but my family is Indian, I was born here and grew up here. Most of my relatives are here. I’m Indian but sort of not. I’m Thai, but sort of not, either. I have a Thai passport, but



Navin Rawanchaidul, *Where is Navin?*, 2007, painted fibreglass, cloth and wood, 176 x 67 x 45 cm (figure only), Edition 3 of 3, Singapore Art Museum Collection.



Jompet, *Java’s Machine: Phantasmagoria*, 2009, mixed media installation, variable dimensions, Singapore Art Museum Collection.



Nindityo Adipurnomo, *Hiding Rituals and the Mass Production II*, 1997-1998, rattan, human hair, plastic bag, paper, string, 250 x 300 x 90 cm, Singapore Art Museum Collection.

if people just look at me, they won't think I'm Thai. This is the kind of experience I've had since I was a child."¹⁹ The sculptural figure is of Navin himself holding a sign that says 'Navin' in Mandarin. He is surrounded by similar signs that say the same in various languages like Thai and English. An accompanying video, *Navins of Bollywood*, was presented in Singapore as part of the docu-performance *Diaspora* (2006) that explored the question of what personal identity meant in a globalised world. In one sequence, a foreigner, played by Navin, searches for the word 'navin' on the internet. The search tells him that 'navin' is Sanskrit for 'new' but subsequently he finds many Navins from all over the world, including women, popping up in his online search. It tells him that he is not alone in the

originally studied painting in the USA. Upon his homecoming, however, he discovered that traditional rattan weaving techniques could communicate his intentions as well as have meaning for his local community. He stopped painting in 2005 and has since concentrated on making sculptures out of rattan and wire. In *Cycle* (2004-2008), Pich made a large rattan sculpture consisting of two connected stomachs to suggest the movement of family ties and how young and old nourish each other. The sense of experiencing cultural, linguistic and political displacement, which arose from Pich's departure to America as a child following political upheavals in his homeland, has been "made manifest in his work and shaped the specific media of his artistic expression."²⁰

Through the magic of electronics, each 'figure' in Java's Machine: Phantasmagoria plays a different sound, which collectively merges into an orchestral 'score', whose clashing rhythms and harmonies sound oddly melodious – a symbol of the sedimented collage of cultural ideas that is Java. Like the discordant harmonies produced by the soldiers, Java's Machine attempts to reconcile the clash of native and foreign ideas in Java.

world but also leaves him wondering who are these other 'Navins' and what are their lives like?

PROPOSITION 4: The embrace of tradition and the vernacular

The development of modern and contemporary art in the region did not simply involve a critique against their own traditions; often artists used the new techniques and concepts to defend their traditions in the face of modernisation. These are often strategic choices, given the specific ways artists have approached traditional elements and how the vernacular has shaped their practices. One strategy involves the recuperation of traditional techniques and materials of the local artisan, which are turned into viable ways for artistic creation. The Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich

The exhibition *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* (held in New York City in 1996) sought "to demonstrate that tradition should not be interpreted as the opposite of contemporaneity."²¹ Instead, tradition and specifically vernacular tradition are important conceptual devices for contemporary Asian artists (not just Southeast Asia) as they are explicit markers of identity with a community or culture and hence can be used as a foil to highlight tensions, linkages and ruptures with contemporary cultural issues.²² In this vein, *Hiding Rituals and the Mass Production II* by Nindityo Adipurnomo interrogates the artist's Javanese background by invoking the symbol of the *konde*, a traditional hairpiece. Worn by women during ceremonies, the *konde* signifies the social and marital status of its wearer and is also a symbol of women's proper place in society. The making of

this sculpture joins two 'hidden' communities: traditional rattan craftsmen and women. Almost as an act of empathy, Nindityo attached tiny plastic bags containing his own hair to the sculpture, alluding to his grandmother and mother's private practice of saving strands of their fallen hair to build up volume in their *konde*. The artist has used tradition and a particular vernacular craft of his community to interrogate and share his own ideas about his culture and community. Similarly, Singapore artist Amanda Heng's own journey to understand her own traditions began with investigations into her family's values and practices, specifically her relationship with her elderly mother. The series of photographs and mixed media installations called *Another Woman* had the artist attempting to establish new ways of connecting with her mother through activities such as pressing clothes together. One particularly moving photograph shows Amanda embracing her mother, the viewer realising that in her mother's face we detect an older version of the artist. In a community where physical contact is not a regular way of building familial relations, this was Heng's way of expressing her kinship and affection for her mother.²³

Comedy often accompanies criticism in contemporary Southeast Asian art that comments on social issues. This tone

of black comedy becomes particularly marked when elements of traditional visual expression are mobilised. *Paraisado Sorbetero* [Orange] (2004) by Jose Tence Ruiz morphs the lowly *kariton* (pushcart) used by the urban poor to eke out a living collecting discarded items into a gothic cathedral. The over-the-top form of this 'mobile church' with its happy orange colour is incongruous with the original humble conveyance firmly anchored in the harsh reality of Filipino streets. Similarly, Heri Dono has discovered that local vernacular traditions are an effective way to enact contemporary critique. *Wayang* in Indonesia provides a wide playing field through which diverse social issues were discussed, often as asides to the main classical narratives of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.²⁴ The performative tradition of the *wayang kulit* therefore has been a fruitful source of ideas for Dono as the imageries are accessible to a wide swath of the public. His installations of angels and puppet figures using low-tech equipment enact morality tales full of crude humour and populated by grotesque, almost sinister figures. Yet surely, one of the objectives is the enactment of community through the shared symbols of the *wayang*.

This essay has attempted to lay out four themes and stances that run through the contemporary art of the region. Although

contemporary art expressions in the region have taken on all the range of genres available to art today including painting, sculpture, installation, performance and video, a concern with the value of art for society and one's community continues to run strong. Much of the artistic practice involves storytelling and narrative. The complex blend of cultural expressions in the region also reflects the ceaseless migrations of people and ideas that characterise the region's history and often throw up issues of identity, particularly among migrant communities. In the midst of constant change, tradition and the vernacular have become not only sources of strength but also a resource for commenting on the ruptures and values of the present. Moving forward, one hopes that future explorations of regional art could use the four propositions laid out in this essay and attempts could be made to sensitively map them onto the specific historical and cultural contexts of the each locale.



Tan Boon Hui is Director of the Singapore Art Museum.



“Contemporary art has this ability to fascinate viewers and make us see things in a different light. Besides offering visitors a tangible reminder of SAM, we hope the products will also make you relook, rethink or re-examine with a renewed sense of wonder, all that has become too familiar to you.”

Tan Boon Hui, Director, Singapore Art Museum

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Piggy Bank

BY B.A.L.L.S (BUREAU FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF LIFESTYLE AND LONGEVITY AND SUCCESS)

The designers wanted to showcase the piggy bank in its truest form: a product of error passed down from the Middle Ages. Named after the Pygg earthenware clay, the money vessel morphed to its current form due to commercial needs. So there is no genetic lineage to the offending creature except for the linguistic heterograph. Thus, this interpretation of the piggy bank carries the embedded controversy of its creation. The designers focused more on collocating the piggy bank in its most natural form rather than the more usual cartoon-like depiction. (SGD\$128.00)



PRODUCT FEATURE: THE PIGGY BANK

One may wonder why "piggy bank", a common name of storage receptacles for coin accumulation, is named after an animal associated with filth and gluttony. In middle English, "pygg" referred to a clay used to make many household objects, including kitchen pots and jars used to save money. By the 18th century, possibly due to the Great Vowel Shift, these "pygg jars" had acquired the name "pig bank"; thus potters started casting the bank in the shape of "pigs". Indeed, if the association between saving money and pigs was a case of misinterpretation, how else can we represent an object that encourages saving?



Hungry < Pig > Happy

BY BASSAM JABRY, CHEMISTRY

Rather than an 'object d'art', the designer wanted to create something dynamic and interactive, but not deviate from the "pig" form as it is a powerful and recognisable paradigm. The design combines the inherent savings function of the object with its cultural symbolism as well as humour and the love for cute animals. When empty, the piggy bank rolls back on its hind legs and looks up hungrily. As more coins are placed in its mouth, the weight will eventually make it roll forward, turning a hungry pig into a happy pig, joyously throwing its hind legs up in the air! This is also a tongue-in-cheek reflection of the joys of eating in Asia. (SGD\$128.00)



40 artists and designers were each given a brief with the task of reinventing an everyday object: piggy bank, tote bag, badge, ruler, eraser, greeting card, mug and pencil box. The result: An exclusive collection MADE FOR SAM

Piggyback

BY WONG MUN SUMM & RICHARD HASSELL, WOHA

A desk organiser for pens, pencils and loose change, the Piggyback is the result of a decision to combine two separate briefs - for a piggy bank and pencil case - and play on the words piggybank/piggyback for the product name. In this design, warm wood pieces offer a pleasing contrast to a cool white precision-milled solid surface material that achieves a seamless fit. (SGD\$160.00)

Note: A month's notice is required to order this product.



PIGXL

By RANDY CHAN,
ZARCH COLLABORATIVES

The designer has used animation tools to 'sculpt' the pig and place a numeric value to this form. The design was conceived from the idea of using computer software as a tool to construct and manipulate. The construction of the pig pushes the final boundary of production and methodology by revealing the value of representation which is analogous to its function as a coin-saving device. (SGD\$128)

MADE FOR SAM is a range of locally designed products that reflect Art in everyday objects and which visitors can own and take home with them.

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MUSESHOP



A Bag of Gold

By YONG JIEYU, J. YU STUDIO

A symbol of wealth, power and greed, gold continues to have a powerful hold on our instinct to survive. Saving is a virtue, but what do we accumulate wealth for? And how much will we destroy for it? The bag of gold is made deliberately without a release plug. With the words "If I sold my soul for a bag of gold" from a song by the band Bright Eyes, it questions whether one should break an object of accumulated coins (and memory) to buy something. The original mould for this bag was made from coins collected from the designer's childhood. He had forgotten what he was saving for, but he had grown to love those coins. (SGD\$128.00)



SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM AND SAM AT 8Q
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE
OLD KALLANG AIRPORT

Singapore Biennale 2011 Open House 13 March – 15 May 2011

Visit the *Singapore Biennale 2011 Open House* and take part in a series of engaging public programmes for everyone. Scheduled guided tours will be conducted at the National Museum of Singapore, SAM at 8Q and the Old Kallang Airport, providing insights into the artworks and ideas behind the exhibition. Invited art writers will also give tours on selected dates in April and May.

And celebrate the grand finale of the *Singapore Biennale* with a host of family-friendly, fun-filled activities on 15 May, when admission is free to all festival venues. For details about the *Singapore Biennale 2011 Open House* schedule and public programmes, please visit www.singaporebiennale.org.



VARIOUS MUSEUMS

Children's Season 2011 14 May – 30 June 2011

The popular *Children's Season* returns on a larger scale this year to inspire, engage and educate the young. With more than 20 Museum Roundtable members involved for the first time, expect a fantastic time with your little ones as the Museum Roundtable invites families to play at and explore the diversity of our museums.

Be thrilled by an array of kids-centric programmes, engaging family activities and interactive exhibitions. Also enjoy free entry to selected museums on 29 May as part of *International Museum Day*. So gather your family and friends for a fun day out! *Children's Season* is part of the museums' efforts to inspire children through early engagement and learning with museums. For more information, visit www.museums.com.sg

april 2011
june

MUSECALENDAR

//ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy: Tradition and Innovation

19 February – 29 May 2011

Explore the themes of tradition, experimentation, identity and scripture in this selection of contemporary Islamic artworks by artists from around the world. See how they have been inspired by both traditional and modern influences in their calligraphic expressions. Admission is free.

Passion ACM Movie Night

30 April 2011, 5-11pm

Kick off your shoes for a free blockbuster movie under the stars at ACM Green! Fun activities like body art and colourful crafts await the whole family at this outdoor screening, along with free ice-cream while stocks last! There will also be free admission to the museum galleries from 5-11pm.

Little Explorer's Travels

28-29 May 2011, 12-5pm

Kids, join the famous 13th-century adventurer Marco Polo in his exciting travels through China, India and the Middle East! Listen to thrilling tales of adventure, dress up in exotic outfits and enjoy colourful performances. During these two days, there will be free admission to the museum from 9am to 7pm.

Justin Lee's East and West Installation

28 May – 30 October 2011

Featuring a small army of terracotta warriors, gentle ladies and auspicious cranes in a procession ceremony, this installation is held in conjunction with *Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor and His Legacy*. Admission is free.

Han Artefacts Display

11 June – 30 October 2011

This exhibition will showcase Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) artefacts from the ACM collection in conjunction with the *Terracotta Warriors* exhibition.

//NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

Beauty in Black

16 March – 13 June 2011

Beauty in Black features 18 dresses from the 1950s to 2000s by leading fashion designers such as Cristóbal Balenciaga, Pierre Cardin, Karl Lagerfeld and Azzedine Alaïa. Also included are garments made and designed in Singapore by Benny Ong and Thomas Wee. These dresses explore the iconic status of the colour black in fashion and its appeal to both wearers and designers. The exhibition also offers a close up of the creative works and skills of the de-

signers through a lively survey of black dresses in a variety of fabrics, styles and effects. Admission is free.

Black – The Queen of All Colours

18 May 2011, 7.30pm

In this talk organised in conjunction with the exhibition *Beauty in Black*, design lecturer Anthony Tan will share about the evolution of the colour black, and why black continues to be the staple affection and obsession of so many around the world and across cultures.

TAGFISH by Berlin (Belgium)

14-16 April 2011, 8pm

Tagfish tells the story of the UNESCO world heritage site Zollverein, a coal mining complex in Germany. Following the exodus of the industry from the region, people sought out new purposes for the abandoned land and vacant industrial heritage sites. A Sheikh has plans to develop a luxury hotel in Zollverein. Can a world heritage site be sold? Six individuals – architect, town planner, professor, negotiator, journalist and provocateur – each have their own opinions about the Sheikh's ambition. They have never met in real life but are now put together on six individual screens, waiting for the Sheikh to take the seventh chair. In a theatrically staged film montage, these interviewees debate, argue and philosophise about feasibility and costs, utopias and visions, and stagnation and impending change.

The PlayDome:

Kaleidoscope of Dreams

14 May – 26 June 2011

Join us in a dedicated exploratory space for children during *Children's Season 2011!* *The PlayDome* invites children aged 3 and above to express their unique voices through meaningful and fun play activities based on visual inspirations and experiences drawn from the museum's galleries and objects. Co-curated with Playeum – The Play Museum, *The PlayDome* will also present original works and interactive installations by local artists and creative professionals in response to the theme of *Kaleidoscope of Dreams*, the museum's galleries and iconic architectural features. For more information, please visit www.national-museum.sg/ThePlaydome

Silent Films by Lotte Reiniger with live music by Amiina (Iceland)

2 June 2011, 7.30pm, 3-5 June 2011, 3pm

One of the greatest creators in animation history, Lotte Reiniger was inspired by Chinese silhouette puppetry to make 60 mesmerising films, 40 of which still survive today. These delicately wrought black and white marvels brought timeless faerie tales to life and revolutionised the film industry from the 1920s to the 1940s. Well known for their work

//ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor and His Legacy

24 June – 16 October 2011

For the first time in Southeast Asia, the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) will present *Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor and His Legacy* in Singapore. Through the Terracotta army and relevant artefacts from Shaanxi province, this special exhibition presents China's rich cultural legacy through stories about the rise of the Qin Dynasty, the first unification of China, the life of the First Emperor and his monumental burial complex. The exhibition focuses on the First Emperor's tomb complex, including the Terracotta Warriors and the development of the Qin state, with an accompanying showcase of smaller terracotta figures from tombs of the Han dynasty, which expand on the ideas first displayed by the Terracotta Army.

Visitors can learn about the cultural achievements of early China – represented by the Terracotta Warriors and Han tomb figures, as well as an array of objects that explore the foundations of unified China and tomb culture; with special emphasis on their aesthetic and historical significance. The exhibition will also attempt to recapture the mystery of the figures – how they were discovered, what they meant and what mysteries remain buried underground. This exhibition is organised by the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau and the Shaanxi Cultural Heritage Promotion Centre, People's Republic of China in partnership with the Asian Civilisations Museum.

with Icelandic band Sigur Rós, Amiina have created ethereal scores for Reiner's silent films, using an assortment of instruments – including violin, glassophone, musical saw and water-filled glasses – to evoke magical soundscapes of wonders and possibilities.

Magnum Abbas

18 June – 18 September 2011

Known for his ability to capture iconic moments during political conflicts or social turmoil, Abbas has roamed the world for 45 years, covering major events and publishing widely in world magazines and newspapers. This event, the first retrospective exhibition of Abbas, takes visitors through a personal journey of 133 striking black and white prints filled with his thoughts and perspectives. A member of Magnum since 1981, Abbas has shown his dedication to exploring the realities of life, including the struggles within different societies in this rapidly globalising world, with an emphasis on religion, defined by him as culture rather than faith.

An Exhibition on Vacheron Constantin Timepieces

23 June – 14 August 2011

This exhibition explores the heritage of Vacheron Constantin that spans more than 250 years as well as the Swiss watchmaker's technology and craftsmanship through a display of timepieces. The watches on display tell the fascinating story of highly skilled artisans and their creations in the history of timekeeping.

//SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

It's Now or Never II New Contemporary Art

Acquisitions from Southeast Asia

8 March – 8 May 2011

In this sequel to *It's Now or Never I: Contemporary Art Acquisitions from Singapore*, which showcased the Singapore Art Museum's (SAM) latest contemporary art acquisitions of photography and video artworks made by artists based in Singapore, SAM puts the spotlight on installation art produced by some of the region's most innovative contemporary artists. On display are 13 art installations made between 2003 and 2010. In the spirit of installation art as a contemporary art form meant to transform the way space is perceived by viewers, the selected acquisitions are grouped into two geographically distinct sections (Mainland and Island) according to how our region has been viewed historically by new entrants into Southeast Asia. The exhibition is a parallel event of the *Singapore Biennale 2011 Open House*.

Negotiating Home, History and Nation:

Two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011

12 March – 26 June 2011

Negotiating Home, History and Nation presents art created over the last two decades by 55 seminal contemporary art practitioners from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, The Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia. Drawing mostly from the SAM collection, the exhibition showcases works spanning the early years of contemporary art-making in the region to the present. This extensive survey gives audiences the opportunity to form a cogent picture of the diverse realities and threads linking Southeast Asia and its art through inquiries into topics such as nation building, urbanisation, religious and gender discourse from an

Asian perspective. *Negotiating Home, History and Nation* is a collaboration between SAM director Tan Boon Hui and SAM curator Khairuddin Hori with guest curator Iola Lenzi. The exhibition is a parallel event of the *Singapore Biennale 2011 Open House*.

Southeast Asian Film Festival

18 March – 7 May 2011

The Moving Image Gallery at SAM at 8Q presents SAM's first Southeast Asian Film Festival, curated and organised by Philip Cheah, Teo Swee Leng and SAM, and coinciding with the exhibition *Negotiating Home, History and Nation*. The featured artists and filmmakers have their pulse on Southeast Asia's most urgent issues and concerns, and these films will give audiences the opportunity to appreciate the diverse realities of this vast and rapidly developing region. There will also be special post-screening discussions with the directors. Please visit www.singaporeartmuseum.sg for full synopses and ticketing information.

Art Garden: Children's Season 2011 at the Singapore Art Museum

3 June – 30 August 2011

The well-loved Children's Season returns this June to SAM and SAM at 8Q with a selection of artworks chosen for their imagination and interactivity. The *Dancing Solar Flower* installation by Alexandre Dang offers a warm welcome to children and families and introduces the potential of environmental friendly technology. Shop at a lively paper fruit market by Thai artist Wit Pimkanchanapong, and look out for the return of *Walter* the curious colossal bunny by Singapore artist Dawn Ng. A programme to introduce contemporary art to young visitors in an engaging, supportive and fun family environment, *Art Garden* will be complemented by art work labels and activity sheets to facilitate visitor engagement.

//SINGAPORE PHILATELIC MUSEUM

SINGAPORE TAKES FLIGHT: A HUNDRED YEARS

16 March - 30 September 2011

2011 marks the centenary of the first flight in Singapore, when Joseph Christiaens piloted a Bristol Boxkite biplane over the race course at Farrer Park. This exhibition celebrates the milestone event with a display of picture postcards, postage stamps and first day covers, along with a private collection of model aircrafts on loan from Mr Ralph Aeria. An award-winning philatelic collection, Malayan Airmail, 1911-1942, from Mr Lim Sa Bee will also be shown until June 2011.

Video: An Art, A History 1965 – 2010 A Selection from the Centre Pompidou and Singapore Art Museum Collections

10 June – 18 September 2011

The Centre Pompidou has been collecting video installations and tapes since 1977, when many museums had yet to focus on the significance of video as an art form. Today, a curious public is anxious to discover these works, seen as somehow “mythical” as they cannot be transmitted via photographic reproduction. *Video: an Art, a History 1965-2010* presents The Centre Pompidou's well-received new media travelling exhibition in a new format with an added Southeast Asian touch. The exhibition has travelled to seven world cities since its 2005 premiere in Barcelona. Its Singapore and Southeast Asia debut will premiere an expanded exhibition that includes SAM's own collection of video works and installations by regional artists.

//SINGAPORE PHILATELIC MUSEUM

Bunny Wonderland

1 February 2011 – 1 January 2012

Rabbits were domesticated more than 2,000 years ago for their meat and fur. Today, these adorable creatures have taken on a more important role as our pets! Learn how to tell apart the different breeds and meet famous bunnies whose popularity has transcended time and cultures. In addition, admire colourful rabbit stamps and philatelic materials from all over the world. Designed for children aged 5 years and above, this exhibition celebrates the zodiac year of the rabbit.

Message Me

May 2011 – March 2012

Man's wish to transmit information goes back to the hieroglyphics or picture lan-

guage of ancient Egypt. For about 2,000 years, printing and writing served as the main forms of communication before the last century's spurt of inventions such as the radio, television, Morse code, facsimile, computer, mobile phone and the internet. *Message Me* examines the messages that have been sent for a variety of reasons. Be it a formal letter or a short message, the contents often provide an insight into the situation that prompted the writing: complaint, love, advice, confession, absence or friendship.

//THE NATIONAL ART GALLERY, SINGAPORE

Seeing the Kites Again

Till 1 May 2011

Exhibition held at SAM

In 2008, Chinese artist Wu Guanzhong donated 113 of his important works to the National Heritage Board. This is the highest-value donation ever given to a public museum institution in Singapore. Wu is best known for marrying traditional Chinese ink painting with modern concepts in Western art. Showcasing selected paintings from the donation, *Seeing the Kites Again* is inspired by Wu's metaphor of the kite.

Notable Acquisitions Exhibition 2011: Featuring Works by Tan Oe Pang

April 2011

Exhibition held at SAM

The Notable Acquisitions Exhibition is an ongoing series featuring recent acquisitions and donations. In April 2011, The National Art Gallery, Singapore will feature a selection of works by Tan Oe Pang. One of Singapore's most established ink artists, Tan's daring use of ink and vivid composition push the boundaries of Chinese ink practice and mark him as one of the most innovative practitioners in the medium today.

//THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM

Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion and its International Sources

1 April 2011 – 26 February 2012

Explore the *sarong kebaya* – the favoured fashion of Peranakan women for generations – in this special exhibition that traces the evolution of the *sarong kebaya* from its roots in 16th-century Islamic garments through its development across Southeast Asia. Visitors will discover how Peranakan fashion was influenced by other communities and how it developed its own unique character. Highlights include batik masterpieces on loan from Dutch museums and an impressive collection of over 400 garments, comprising *kebaya* and robes dating from the 18th to the 20th century.

//NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

10 Years that Shaped a Nation, 1965-1975

Woodlands Library

4-28 April 2011

On 9 August 1965, barely two years after a political merger with Malaysia, Singapore was suddenly thrust into independence and separated from the Federation. As a small country with no natural resources and facing unemployment, vulnerable security and far from satisfactory health conditions, the leaders of Singapore had to stand up to the challenges of building a viable nation. This exhibition looks back at an important period of Singapore's history – our first decade of independence. Learn about the major contributions of our founding generation of leaders and appreciate how they laid the foundation for Singapore as an independent city-state. Many of the lessons learnt remain relevant today and in the future.

International Museum Week & Children's Season Celebrations Memories at Old Ford Factory & Reflections at Bukit Chandu

May 2011

Various activities such as painting, colouring, gardening, hat-making and food-tasting will be organised for children aged between 3 and 12 years. The activities will be designed to allow children to reflect back upon the time of war, and appreciate the peace and harmony they enjoy today.

Heritage In Photos, 1950-2000

2 May – 26 June 2011

The exhibition features milestone events in Singapore's history between 1950 and 2000 covering themes such as culture, education and sports. The exhibition will be held at Ang Mo Kio Library from 2-29 May and move to Tampines Library from 30 May to 26 June.

Oral History Training for Yunnan Provincial Archives

April 2011

The training session shares the National Archives' expertise in oral history methodology, developed over 31 years, with its counterpart in Yunnan, China. Based on best practices and standards adopted by international archival institutions, this methodology will help Yunnan Provincial Archives systematically document the history and oral traditions of the province's indigenous minority tribes, many of whom have only a spoken language with no written form.

//PRESERVATION OF MONUMENTS BOARD

Of Monuments and Memories

Feast your eyes on an artistic photography exhibition by the photographers who brought you the book *Resonance Songs of our Forefathers*. Featuring Singapore's 27 National Monuments, the exhibition is a chance to learn about the built heritage of Singapore as well as the stories behind their facades. Visit www.pmb.sg for more details on the exhibition dates and venues.



Dream Weavers

EXPLORING
GUJARAT'S
TEXTILE
TRADITIONS



looms, ceremonial objects or luxury goods. Since antiquity, India has been famous for its textiles, especially fine cotton and silk shipped via trade links that existed long before the colonial era. The Greek *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, written in 60 CE) specifically referred to trade in cotton textiles from Gujarat, the Coromandel Coast and Bengal. Cotton textiles were “central to the long distance commercial relationships” across the Indian Ocean. “Indian cloth functioned, among the many, as currency in Africa, as a wage good in Southeast Asia and as fashion article in Europe.” These textiles were traded for all kinds of goods from medicinal plants and spices to precious gold.

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) recently acquired a rare and important collection of Indian Trade textiles largely intended for Southeast Asian markets. Wood block printing and *patola* (a textile originating from Gujarat) have been extensively documented in the past decades, but there is room for further research into trade networks and stylistic links between textile and architectural motifs. Thus, curators from ACM made a trip to selected areas in Gujarat, namely Vadodara, Ahmedabad, Surat, Patan and Rajkot, to document surviving Indian textile traditions by looking at the techniques, materials and motifs used by contemporary artisans.

Gujarat has flourished as a trading hub for many centuries as coastal navigation developed to connect the ports of ancient civilisations. Khambhat, Diu, Gandhar, Ghogha, Bharuch, Rander and Surat along the Gulf of Cambay and the coast of Saurashtra emerged as active port towns with trading networks that extended into the hinterland of Gujarat, Marwar, Mewar and Malwa all the way through the Muslim Sultanate, Mughal and the Colonial periods.

We documented two traditions of textile production, namely, block-printing and *patola* weaving. First, we visited several block-printing establishments with the help of Damodar Gajjar, whose family has been in the block-carving business for several generations. We visited his nephew’s factory in the outskirts of Vadodara, where fine cotton and silk sarees are printed. The team documented many old designs on blocks that the

Think of Gujarat and what comes to mind is a stirring sequence of ancient realms: the Harrapans, that great Indus Valley civilisation dating as far back as the 3rd millennium BCE; the Yadavas of Krishna’s clan who held sway from their capital Dwarka; the Mauryan empire founded by Chandragupta with its capital at Junagadh; the Jain ruler Samprati who built famous temples at pilgrimage sites such as Girnar and Palitana; the Solanki dynasty of the 11th-12th centuries, and the list goes on.

By Clement Onn

Gujarat’s rich heritage and culture are challenged only by its topographical diversity of forested hills and fertile plains to the east, vast tidal marshes and deserts in the Rann of Kutch in the west, and a rocky shoreline jutting into its heartland. Home to significant populations of Hindus, Jains, Muslims and Christians as well as various indigenous tribes, this Indian state with a population of some 50 million boasts a patchwork of religious shrines and areas steeped in the lore of multiple faiths. Not to forget,

Gujarat is the homeland of Mahatma Gandhi, the spiritual father of independent India, who was born in Porbandar and worked for many years in the city of Ahmedabad.

My induction to India’s westernmost bulkhead began with a simple block of wood and a delicate yarn of silk. In the hands of skilled craftsmen, these ordinary objects are transformed into important design elements and materials for textiles long revered and sought after by many Asians and Europeans as sacred heir-

owners have had in their collection over the generations and watched the print-makers – Muslims from Uttar Pradesh – hand-print the textiles using commercial water-based dyes. They produce traditional as well as innovative designs, the latter including some freely painted motifs.

Our other significant informant was Maneklal Gajjar, a national award-winning block-maker based in Pethapur. Now in his 80s, he showed us pattern books owned by his grandfather with the hand-written names of the printers who originally ordered the patterns to be carved, which in turn were commissioned by merchants at ports such as Surat. He also showed us the various techniques and stages of block-carving. Many of the motifs were significantly similar to those found on the step-wells and other temples we visited and several designs were comparable to the old pieces viewed in museum collections.

Patolu is also known as double ikat silk textile where both warp and weft are resist-dyed prior to stringing on the loom. It is a difficult and extremely labour-intensive task that requires immense concentration and careful preparation.

Aside from textile production, we took a holistic approach in our research by visiting archaeological and temple sites. A little historical background brings us back to the 1st century CE when control of India's western region passed between a succession of warring dynasties and nomadic tribes, including the Gurjars, from whom the state eventually derived its name, and the Kathi warriors of Saurashtra. Gujarat eventually came under the control of the Solanki dynasty in the 11th





-12th centuries. It was a golden period in the state's architectural history as the rulers commissioned marvellous Hindu and Jain temples and step-wells. Many of these structures suffered during the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni in 1027, but Muslim rule was not actually established until the Khalji conquest in 1299. Eight years later, Muzaffar Shah's declaration of independence from Delhi marked the foundation of the Sultanate of Gujarat, which lasted until its conquest by the Mughal emperor, Akbar, in the 16th century. In this period, Muslim, Jain and Hindu styles were melded to produce remarkable Indo-Islamic mosques and tombs. Contrary to impressions encouraged by sectarian violence, particularly in Ahmedabad, Islam never eclipsed

Adalaj stepwell at Gandhinagar – the 11th century Surya Temple at Modhera; the 15th century port and fort of Surat, the 16th century Sidi Saiyyed Mosque at Ahmedabad and a famous 18th century Haveli (house with a courtyard) in Vaso.

Located in the busy centre of Ahmedabad, the Sidi Saiyyed Mosque is famed for the magnificent jali (lattice work) screens lining its upper walls. Two semicircular screens high on the western walls are the most spectacular, with floral designs exquisitely carved out of stone. The stonework within depicts heroes and animals from popular Hindu myths – a result of the cultural synthesis of Hindu and Jain craftsmanship on an Islamic tradition that rarely allowed the depiction of living beings in mosques. The extraordinary Rani ki vav in Anhilwada Patan, northern Gujarat, was probably the most stunning and acclaimed by many as the greatest step-well. It was built for the Solanki queen Udaimati in 1050 and extensively restored in the 1980s, recreating as perfectly as possible the original extravagant carvings. The geometric patterns along the relief carvings bear resemblance to those in the *patola* textiles.

A Gujarat poet once wrote, “Padi patole bhat faatey pan phite nahin”, which means “the design laid down in the patola may be torn, but it shall never fade”.

Hinduism or Jainism and the three great religions have lived side by side for centuries.

Gujarat's architectural diversity reflects the influences of its many different rulers – Buddhist Mauryans, Hindu rajas and Muslim emperors. Our primary purpose in visiting ancient sites was to document relevant contextual imagery from which textile artists might have drawn their inspiration. Documentation footage was made to capture some of the iconography and motifs bearing resemblance to those found in the Indian Trade cloth collection. The most intriguing task was to examine and pull the design links between architectural and textile production. Some of the significant sites include two famous step-wells – the 11th century Rani ki vav at Patan and 15th century

In Patan, we saw the complex weaving of silk *patola*, once the preferred garment of queens and aristocrats and an important export item. *Patolu* [pl. *patola*] is also known as double ikat silk textile where both warp and weft are resist-dyed prior to stringing on the loom. It is a difficult and extremely labour-intensive task that requires immense concentration and careful preparation. The resulting end product woos the hearts of many connoisseurs. *Patola* were used in the 17th-18th centuries as precious gifts. *Patola* of Patan were sent to Southeast Asia and were famous from Java and Sumatra to Samarkand, Basra, Damask and Rome as early as the 15th century.

The Salvis are a world-renowned *patola* weaving family. We conducted in-depth interviews with Rohitbhai Salvi, his

brother Bharatbhai Salvi and his son Rahul Salvi. The brothers are national award winners and are recognised for their specialised skills by textile and museum professionals around the world. The Salvis, who trace their family genealogy to as early as 800 years ago, are said to originate from Jalna, near Aurangabad, in Maharashtra. They were brought to Patan due to the patronage of a Solanki king, Kumarapala (1143-1173), who was a devoted Jain and often requested for a silk dhoti to be delivered by his weavers everyday for his ceremonial *puja*. At the peak of royal patronage, Patan had about 700 weavers. Today there are only three remaining *patola* families. At the Salvi workshop, we documented several stages of the double ikat weaving techniques such as the tie and dye process and preparation of colour dyes, and saw examples of how both warp ikat and weft ikat techniques were applied. The most astonishing part of the trip was to witness the various stages of textile making. Each stage is a fruit of past efforts, experiences and knowledge passed on from generation after generation. According to the Salvis, each sari takes from four to six months to produce and a mistake at any stage is detrimental to the overall production. As a result, time and cost will be lost.

Patola from the Salvi family provide a model of an ethical business for the textile tradition, with many layered values that flourish and serve both producers and consumers in producing objects of living cultural value. The family has made efforts to revive the use of natural vegetable dyes and pure silk. Their textiles are patiently crafted expressions of sophistication and convey a deep symbiosis with nature. The complex weaving and the vibrant colours are all unique, a deliberate counterpoint to the homogeneity of our modern world, in their weaving of slow time into pieces as durable today as they were traditionally, for life-long use and as cherished heirlooms. A Gujarat poet once wrote, “Padi patole bhat faatey pan phite nahin”, which means “the design laid down in the patola may be torn, but it shall never fade”. Thus, the weavings of today will still ‘speak’ and last across generational time.

Clement Onn is Curator, South Asia, Asian Civilisations Museum.

Nestled in a quiet loop between Kampong Bahru Road and Spottiswoode Park, 55 Blair Road offers a study in contrast. This pre-war terrace house has been meticulously restored and renovated to serve as a modern abode where design meets conservation. In addition, a thoughtful reconfiguration of the internal layout of a long, narrow building and assiduous choices in material have led to a living space that saves energy in its embracing of natural light and wind.

open HOUSE

55 BLAIR ROAD



Intact art deco ornamentation greets those who pass by the façade of the building, which has been restored to pristine condition. The walls within, however, enclose an ethereal scene of uncluttered whiteness. The design team, led by architects ONG&ONG Pte Ltd, has pushed the envelope, working around the spatial constraints of a traditional townhouse to create a home distinguished by continuity, symmetry and the embracing of light.



ROOM FOR THE SKY

No walls stand between the living room, central courtyard and kitchen. Visitors are welcomed in a spacious lounge with side walls that double as exhibition canvases as well as storage space through the ingenious use of large art pieces to conceal recesses within the concrete. In this unhindered hallway, spatial symmetry is achieved through a spiral staircase placed between the lounge and inner courtyard, forming a central pin through the building and running up into the attic. The staircase harks to the steel and winding fire escapes of old and offers a subtle reminder that one is in the heart of a vintage terrace house. Through a cylindrical skylight, the sun illuminates the stairwell with a vertical beam that strikes the base of the stairs and delivers a daily cycle of dynamic contrasts.

A prized feature of pre-war housing, the open-air courtyard is retained to provide natural cooling and ventilation for all corners of the house. But in a deliberate break from the past, the designers have removed a covered connection that conventionally linked the front of the property to its rear. The historical profile of the house is maintained, however, through the original roof profile and a jackroof that allows light to enter and penetrate all other areas.

Instead of solid space, the courtyard is now dominated by a small swimming pool, parts of which are overlaid by stepping stones that provide access to the kitchen. The walls of both the courtyard and kitchen are clad by an aluminium skin designed to reflect and enhance the natural rays of the sun. Retractable glass panels have been installed for times when there is a need to seal off the kitchen without compromising the visual continuity of the ground floor.

REACHING UP TO SPACE


The house had previously been renovated to accommodate several rooms with ensuites. This has given way to a seamless volume of internal space on both levels that convey a feeling of freshness and fluidity. The sense of openness and connectivity continues in the reinstatement of a large void at the second storey master bedroom, which permits a glimpse of the house's original shuttered casement windows from the ground floor lounge.

Staying true to the axial layout of the house, the master suite provides access to a study area via a path flanked by symmetrically placed bookshelves. In the attic above, a newly created mezzanine floor houses a guest bedroom featuring windows with timber frames consistent with the building's original ethos. This prevalent blend of the old and the new is perhaps best imbibed from the ensuite bathroom of the master bedroom, which protrudes slightly over the courtyard and overlooks a Century Frangipani.

A tropical flowering tree significant in both Hindu and Buddhist cultures, the Frangipani's gnarled trunk adds organic richness and natural character to the ultra-modern interior of a house that was a Category B winner in the Urban Redevelopment Authority's 2010 Architecture Heritage Awards for its effective homage to vintage charm and contemporary habitation.

Images courtesy of ONG&ONG Pte Ltd.





Staying true to the axial layout of the house, the master suite provides access to a study area via a path flanked by symmetrically placed bookshelves.

MUSEGALLERY

NGUYEN NHU HUAN (THAI HA)
WITH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FROM
CO TAN LONG CHAU, NGUYEN TIEN AND
NGUYEN THANH HIEP

*THE HO CHI MINH CAMPAIGN: THE SPEEDY
LIBERATION OF THE SOUTH VIETNAM 30.4.1975*

LACQUER ON BOARD
210 CM X 549 CM (9 PANELS)
COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD



By far the largest lacquer painting ever produced on the subject of the Vietnam War, this painting took veteran soldier Thai Ha (1922-2005) three years to complete. Thai Ha passed away a year later. The painting is an expression of the artist's nationalist fervour and strong sentiments towards the reunification of his country. Vietnam was divided after the defeat of the French colonial forces in the 1950s. In the American War that followed, the North Vietnamese Army attempted to capture the South to unite the country. Thai Ha, who fought in both wars, participated in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign that was the last major attack that led to the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and the "speedy" liberation of South Vietnam. He recorded his experience in this 9-panel painting, composing various scenes from sketches he made on-site. He dutifully recorded the clashes that took place along the trail to the final moments when the North's flag was raised over the Palace of Independence to signal victory.

**THE NATIONAL ART GALLERY,
SINGAPORE**

SINGAPORE TAKES FLIGHT

*A 100 Years of
Aviation*

TOWN WITH A TALE TO TELL

*Joo Chiat bags
Inaugural Heritage
Town Status*

COPY AFTER COPY

*Some Thoughts
on Authenticating
Chinese Paintings*

FROM CRISIS TO FAITH

*Abbas' 45 Years
in Photography*

MUSEUMS



TOWN WITH A TALE TO TELL

Joo Chiat bags inaugural
Heritage Town status
in NHB competition

By Alvin Tan

A quaint and charming district by the east coast of Singapore, Joo Chiat was named the winner of the National Heritage Board's (NHB) inaugural Heritage Town competition on 19 February 2011.

Launched in October 2010, this bi-annual competition aims to encourage the island's various constituencies to take the lead in promoting their history and seeks to increase heritage heartshare at the community level. In addition to earning the title of Heritage Town for 2011, Joo Chiat was also awarded funds of S\$100,000 to showcase its heritage through a line-up of innovating activities and programmes for its residents.

A WINNING SUBMISSION

Joo Chiat, led by its Member of Parliament, Mr Chan Soo Sen and grassroots leaders, distinguished itself with an outstanding submission that involved its community and grassroots organisations. The result was a showcase of the district's remarkable variety of historical highlights as well as a comprehensive proposal for new heritage activities for 2011.

For instance, Joo Chiat will launch a heritage trail in June 2011, a Peranakan Heritage Month in July 2011, and an Eurasian Heritage Month in December 2011. Through these thematic activities, the organisers hope to galvanise residents to preserve and experience Joo Chiat's rich legacy which embodies the area's diverse and unique cultural heritage.

HISTORY OF JOO CHIAT

The story of Joo Chiat began in the 1820s when early European settlers carved out plantations in the areas around the present Mountbatten Road, Tanjong Katong Road and East Coast Road. These pioneers included Francis Bernard,

brother-in-law of Lieutenant-Colonel William Farquhar, the first Resident of Singapore, and Thomas Dunman, Singapore's first Commissioner of Police. Hoo Ah Kay, a wealthy Chinese merchant commonly known as Mr Whampoa, also moved into the Joo Chiat area by buying parcels of land to grow cotton.

By the 1930s, a prominent Chinese businessman and philanthropist, Chew Joo Chiat (the "King of Katong"), had acquired much of the land in the area to cultivate gambier and subsequently, co-

Famous personalities who used to live in Joo Chiat include the late former President of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee; Zubir Said, composer of our national anthem; and Ng Eng Teng, one of Singapore's foremost sculptors and Cultural Medallion winner.

conut trees. Chew's legacy was immortalised when he agreed to have a road paved through his plantation and the Colonial government decided to name this road in his honour.

Joo Chiat today is home to a vibrant community with rich traces of both the Eurasian and Peranakan cultures. The neighbourhood is famous for its colourful shophouses that blend architectural influences from both east and west. Many also flock to the area to sample its wealth of culinary delights. An interesting mix of residents also called Joo Chiat home:

famous personalities who used to live here include the late former President of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee; Zubir Said, composer of our national anthem; and Ng Eng Teng, one of Singapore's foremost sculptors and Cultural Medallion winner.

EXPANDING HERITAGE HEARTSHARE

Other than the Heritage Town project, NHB hopes to develop more nodes in the islandwide heritage landscape by working together with schools, community groups and clubs, Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs) and Residents' Committees (RCs). Through such collaborations, NHB hopes to develop more community-based heritage activities that could strengthen Singaporeans' sense of national identity and belonging.

NHB is also working with other government agencies to incorporate local heritage content and features into housing estates and libraries island-wide. From heritage galleries to travelling exhibitions to the heartlands, these heritage efforts strive not only to educate the public on different aspects of Singapore's heritage but also to remind Singaporeans of our common past and achievements.

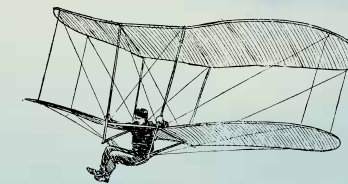
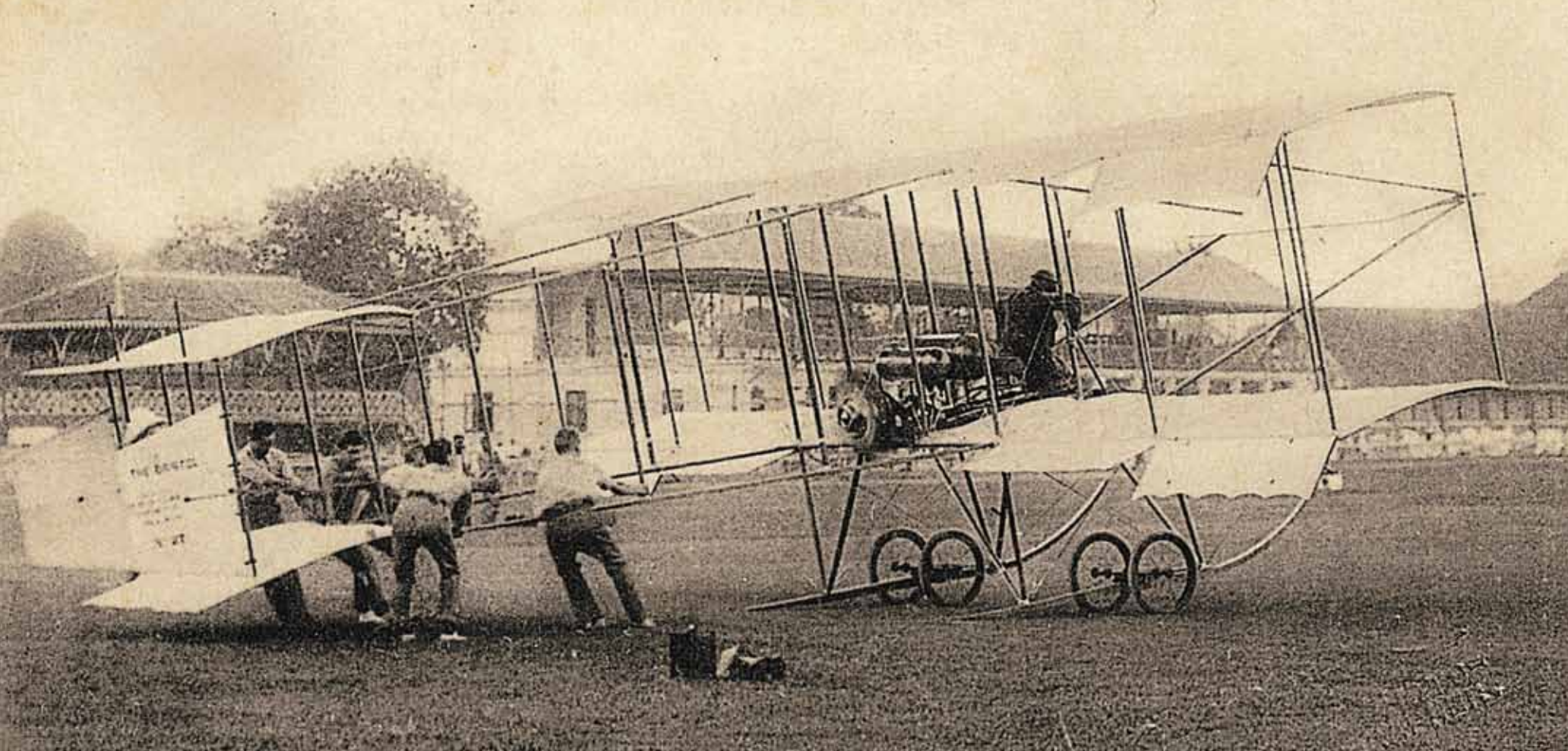
This year, NHB's iconic *Singapore HeritageFest (SHF)*, which celebrates Singapore's multicultural heritage, will be celebrated in the heartlands. *SHF 2011* will feature heritage trails, nostalgia-themed mass activities and competitions involving multi-generational or inter-racial teams to promote community bonding through heritage. As the winning Heritage Town, Joo Chiat as well as its residents will also be participating in *SHF 2011*.

Alvin Tan is Director of Heritage Institutions & Covering Director for Industry Development, National Heritage Board.



SINGAPORE TAKES FLIGHT

A HUNDRED YEARS OF AVIATION



Aviation history was made on 16 March 1911. On this day, the first aircraft took flight in Singapore, when a Bristol Boxkite biplane piloted by

Joseph Christiaens rose into the air from the old Race Course at Farrer Park. It was a flight demonstration at the first aviation meet held in Singapore. To mark the centenary of this historic occasion, the Singapore Philatelic Museum has opened a new exhibition titled **SINGAPORE TAKES FLIGHT: A HUNDRED YEARS**. Running from 11 March till September 2011, this exhibition celebrates the milestone event with picture postcards, postage stamps and first day covers alongside a private collection of model aircraft on loan from Mr Ralph Aeria. An award-winning philatelic collection, *Malayan Airmail 1911-1942*, from Mr Lim Sa Bee will also be displayed from end March to June 2011.

By Lucille Yap

THE PLANE AND THE PILOT

The Bristol Boxkite was a modified version of the Henri Farman biplane, a famous and widely used model produced in France and first flown in 1909. Seating two, the Boxkite was developed by the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company, a Bristol-based company that was later renamed the Bristol Aeroplane Company.

The first Boxkite flew on 29 July 1910. It was put into production, in significant numbers for the time, at Britain's first aircraft factory in Filton, Bristol. A highly successful aircraft, the Boxkite soon drew the attention of the British War Office which placed an order for four aircraft. This was followed by orders from the Australian Army, India and Russia. The Boxkite was used extensively as an elementary training aircraft.

In 1964, three Boxkite replicas were built with modern engines by F.G. Miles Engineering Ltd for the Twentieth Century Fox film *Those Magnificent Men and their Flying Machines*, which was very successful at the box office. Today, an Australian project team, known as Project 2014, is reconstructing the Boxkite to commemorate the centenary of the first military flight in Australia on 1 March 2014.

The pilot of Singapore's virgin flight, Joseph Christiaens, was an engineer, race car driver and aviator born to a well-to-do family near Brussels in Belgium in 1879. In March 1910, Christiaens learned to fly in a Henri Farman airplane and in the following month, was registered with Belgian Pilot License #7, becoming one of the first 11 aviators registered at the Aero Club of Belgium. Thereafter, he took part in a number of aviation meetings racing



Henri Farman's plane in Europe in 1910.

In 1911, Joseph Christiaens, with his brother Arnaud, made a tour of the East Indies, taking with him two Bristol Boxkite biplanes. An avid car racer, he died on 25 February 1919 in a road accident while testing a racing car in England. His speeding car crashed into a wall while trying to avoid a horse-cart emerging out of a side road.

FROM RACE COURSE TO INTERNATIONAL AVIATION ROUTE

Built in 1842 by members of the Singapore Sporting Club, the old Race Course at Farrer Park served as a sports and recreational hub for European residents. Although the race course moved to new premises in Bukit

Timah in 1933, the road name "Race Course Road" continues to serve as a reminder of its early equestrian heritage.

Eight years after Christiaens' historic flight in his Boxkite, the Race Course saw action once more when a Vickers Vimy G-EAOU piloted by Captain Ross Smith landed for a stopover on 3 December 1919. Captain Ross had flown 22 days and 13,900 km from England and was en route to Darwin, Northern Australia. He completed his 135-hour journey on 10 December 1919.

The beginning of 1930s saw the rapid expansion of air routes connecting Europe to the Far East. The Dutch airline, KLM (the Dutch abbreviation of *Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij* or Royal Dutch

Airlines), placed Alor Star, Singapore and Penang on the international aviation route map in 1931, 1933 and 1936 respectively. Singapore's first direct link with Europe was established on 3 May 1933 when a KLM Fokker F-18 put the island on the trunk route between Amsterdam and Batavia (now Jakarta).

At the end of 1934, Imperial Airways, the first British commercial long-range air transport company, established its England-Australia link with Singapore as a key stopover point. Qantas Empire Airways took over the Singapore-Australia sector in 1935.

After the Second World War, jetliners with greater speed and capacity replaced propeller-driven aircraft. The first jet to ar-

rive in Singapore was a British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) Comet in 1951. Produced by de Havilland, a British aviation company, the Comet was the world's first commercial jet airliner with a sleek aerodynamic body, pressurised cabin and seating up to 36 passengers. Unfortunately, the plane was unable to land at Kallang Airport due to runway limitations and so landed at the Changi Royal Air Force airfield instead. Airmail was delivered to Singapore for the first time by jet plane in 1951.

FROM CIVIL AERODROME TO CHANGI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

From 1928, small land aircraft and seaplanes were handled at the military airbase of the Royal Air Force at Seletar. Growth in air traffic in the early 1930s, however, prompted the call for a new civilian airport facility. Then Governor of the Straits Settlements Sir Cecil Clementi expressed on 31 August 1931 his opinion in words that would prove prophetic in

the later decades of the century:

"It is not a question of which aerodrome in Singapore Island would be the cheapest but which aerodrome in Singapore Island would be the best. Looking into the future, I expect to see Singapore become one of the largest and most important airports of the world... It is, therefore, essential that we should have here, close to the heart of town, an aerodrome which is equally suitable for land planes and for sea planes; and the best site, beyond all question, is the Kallang Basin."

Work on this massive reclamation task began in 1932. Kallang Airport was officially opened by the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Thomas Shenton, on 12 June 1937. It was praised as the finest airport in the British Empire.

Regional aviation continue to expand, with the launch of the first internal air service in Malaya, Wearne's Air Service, on 28 June 1937, which flew three times a

Top row: Some early postcards of the Race Course at Farrer Park. The first postcard shows Captain Ross Smith after he landed in Singapore.

Lower row (from left to right): Qantas Flight Cover commemorating the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, 3 June 1953.

KLM First Flight Cover from Singapore to Batavia, Indonesia, 1933.

Imperial Airways Experimental Flight Cover from Singapore to Darwin, Australia, 1 April 1931.

Imperial Airways First Flight Cover from London, UK to Singapore, 1933.

BOAC Comet Jetliner First Flight Cover from Singapore to London, UK, 1959.

Top right: Stamps commemorating the first Vickers Vimy flight from England to Australia and the first trans-Atlantic flight.

glided the Vimy down at as low a speed as possible, and just before we touched the ground.... The next day, December 4, was my birthday, and to reach Australia within the specified thirty-day time limit meant that we had to arrive in Darwin on the 12th, eight days from now, and four more landings to make after leaving Singapore. Thus it will be seen we still had four days in hand. I therefore decided to remain the whole of next day at Singapore and work on our machine. ... The heat in Singapore was intense and, coming from the cold of the English winter, we felt it severely.

"From London to Australia by Aeroplane, A Personal Narrative of the First Aerial Voyage Half Around the World" by Sir Ross Smith, published in The National Geographic Magazine, March 1921



Postcard showing crowds flocking towards the Vickers Vimy biplane after it had landed at Farrer Park.





Below (from top to bottom): Wearne's First Flight Cover from Penang to Singapore, 28 June 1937. • Malayan First Day Air Service Cover from Singapore to Penang, 28 June 1937. • Maxicard of Paya Lebar Airport. • 2008 Singapore Changi Airport Terminal 3. • 1981 Singapore Changi Airport Miniature Sheet

week from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

Advances in aviation technology after the Second World War led to the development of bigger and faster civil aircraft. The inability of Kallang Airport to accommodate the Comet led to the extension and strengthening of the runway, but it was becoming apparent that a new civil airport was necessary. Construction thus began in 1952 of the Paya Lebar Airport, which was completed on 20 August 1955 and officially opened by then Chief Minister of Singapore, David Marshall, with British Colonial Secretary, Alan Lennox-Boyd, as guest-of-honour.

After independence, Singapore's growing role as an international trading hub and tourism destination led to the construction of Changi International Airport. The first phase, completed in 1981, included a runway, 45 aircraft parking bays, a passenger terminal, a maintenance hangar, a fire station, workshops and administrative offices, an airfreight complex, cargo agent buildings, in-flight catering kitchens and a 78-metre high control tower. Changi International Airport began operations on 1 July 1981 and was officially opened on 29 December 1981.

The airport later expanded with the addition of Terminal 2 which became operational on 22 November 1990 and was officially opened on 1 June 1991. Further expansion took place in 2008 with the opening of Terminal 3, which was designed to handle the gigantic Airbus A380, on 9 January 2008. The recent boom in budget air travel saw the addition of a separate Budget Terminal which began operations on 26 March 2006.

A CENTURY OF PLANE DELIGHTS

The history of Singapore's national airlines, which began in May 1947, is illustrated in a 2003 Aircraft Stamp Series. The stamps trace the development of our national airlines from Malayan Airways to Singapore Airlines, and their aircraft through the decades, from the light twin-engine Airspeed Consul to modern day Jumbos, Concorde, and Airbuses.

In February 2006, the first Airbus A380 in full Singapore Airlines livery was flown to Singapore. On 25 October the following year, the first commercial A380 service, SQ380, carried 455 passengers from Singapore to Sydney. Regular services with the A380 began on 28 October 2007. Thus, history was made once more as a French-assembled giant soared over Singapore, drawing countless eyes to the sky nearly a century after the first fateful flight by a Belgian in a biplane over the city's former race course.

Lucille Yap is a Senior Curator at the Singapore Philatelic Museum



The flight of birds has fascinated mankind for ages. Our quest to soar like the birds had led to many fantasies and inventions that would aid humans to 'fly'.

For centuries, humans have tried to fly like birds and studied avian flight. Wings, made of feathers or lightweight wood, were attached to arms to test their ability to take to the air. The results were often disastrous, as the muscles of the human

arms are incomparable to those of birds. Kites were important to the invention of flight as they were the forerunners to balloons and gliders. Since 400 BCE, kites have been used by the Chinese in religious ceremonies. In 1000 BCE, the Chinese were reported to have used kites for in warfare, carrying men as spies and dropping firebombs over enemy territory. This practice was witnessed by the Venetian merchant-traveller Marco Polo (1254-1324) in the 1300s when he was in

China. There are very reliable records of human attempts to fly until the early medieval times when the so-called tower jumpers appeared in force. Few of these courageous but perhaps misguided men were successful in their flying endeavours and in surviving their feats.

Between 1488 and 1514, the Italian inventor Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) made the first real studies of flight. He left over 100 drawings that illustrated his theories

The 'Flyer' attempted its maiden flight on 14 December 1903 in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, USA. This attempt was not successful. The Wright brothers tried again three days later. This time, the Flyer lifted itself into the air at 10.35am. Although the flight lasted only 12 seconds and covered just 37 metres, it was the first self-powered, manned, heavier-than-air controlled flight in history.

on bird and mechanical flight. The drawings show the wings and tails of birds, ideas for human-carrying machines, and devices for the testing of wings.

The Ornithopter, a flying machine drawn by Leonardo da Vinci, was designed to be powered by a combination of leg and arm movements activated by means of mechanical devices. The machine was never actually created.

Leonardo da Vinci soon learned to imitate the way birds glide rather than use human-powered wing motion. He designed and built winged gliders for human use.

The 18th century saw the emergence of hot air balloons with proponents like the Montgolfier brothers, Joseph-Michel (1740-1810) and Jacques-Étienne (1745-1799). The French siblings used smoke from a fire to blow hot air into a silk bag, which was then attached to a basket. The Montgolfiers first sent people up in hot air balloons with a manned flight on 21 November 1783.

English engineer, Sir George Cayley (1773-1857), is considered the father of aerodynamics, which is the study of the movement of objects through the air. In 1804, he built the world's first successful model glider which was successfully flown by a young boy. In 1853, Cayley reshaped the glider's wing and added a tail to help with the stability.

The German Otto Lilienthal (1848-1896) made the first true controlled flights, gliding up to a distance of 230 metres. He experimented with various monoplane and biplane gliders which resembled giant bats. After more than 2,500 flights, Lilienthal was killed when he lost control during a sudden strong gust of wind and crashed into the ground.

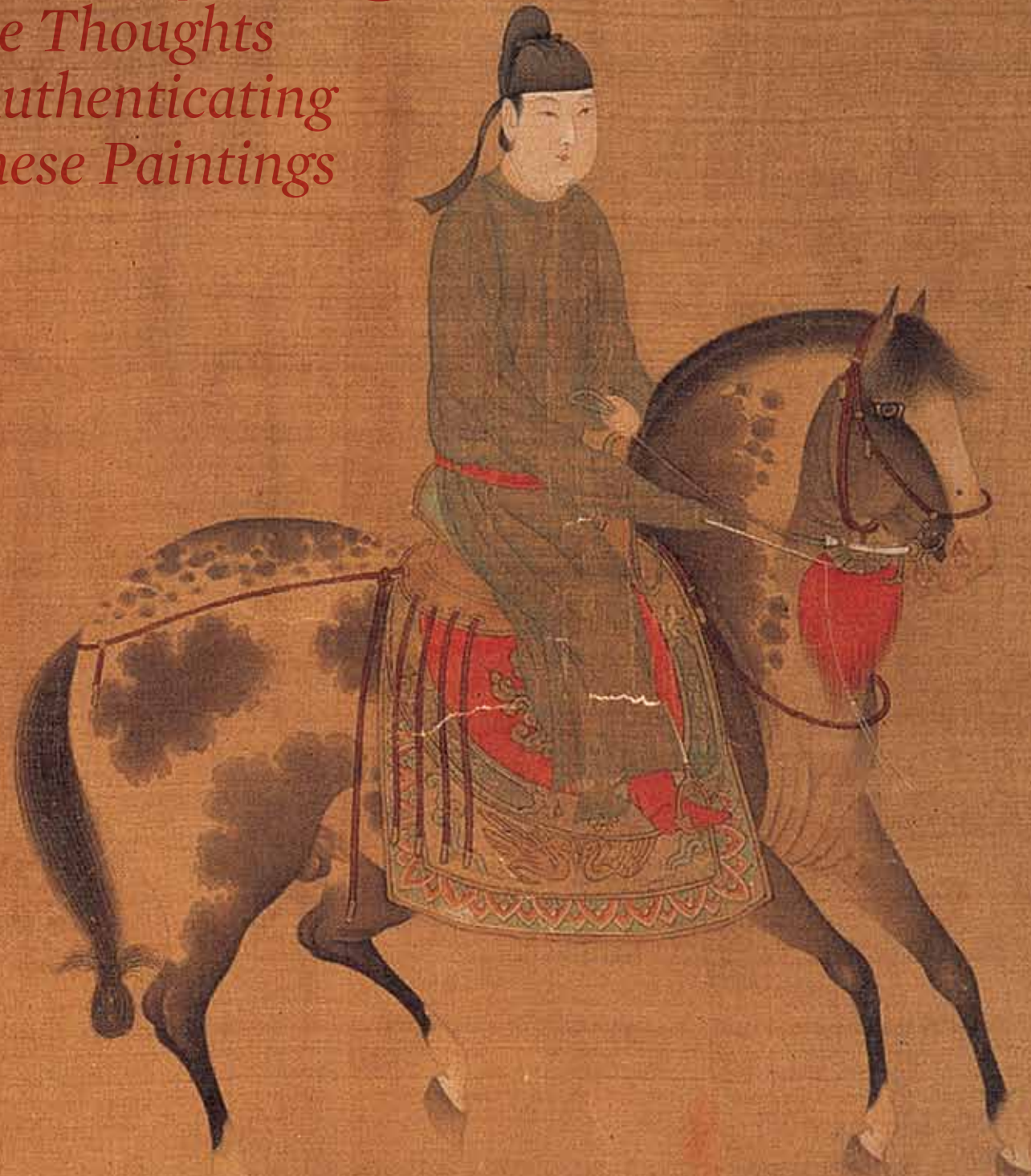
The American Wright Brothers, Wilbur and Orville, constructed the first powered airplane, the 'Flyer', in the summer of 1903. Piloted by Wilbur, the Flyer attempted its maiden flight on 14 December 1903 in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, USA. This attempt was not successful. The brothers tried again three days later. This time piloted by Orville, the Flyer lifted itself into the air at 10.35 am. Although the flight lasted only 12 seconds and covered a distance of just 37 metres, it was the first self-powered, manned, heavier-than-air controlled flight in history.

Man's Quest to Fly



COPY after

Some Thoughts on Authenticating Chinese Paintings



Detail of *Court Beauties on an Outing* 丽人行, attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

By Low Sze Wee

A recent edition of *BeMUSE*¹ featured a painting by Pu Ru 溥儒 (1896-1963) titled *A Copy of the "Beauties on an Outing"* by Li Gonglin from the Asian Civilisations Museum collection (Fig.1). Apart from its intrinsic beauty, the work epitomises a key feature of Chinese painting, which is a reverence for the past through the act of copying. As its title suggests, the painting is based on a work attributed to an earlier artist, Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106), from the Song dynasty.² Li's work is also similar in composition and style to another painting, possibly done by the Song emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100-1126) who had in turn copied a now-lost work of Tang dynasty artist Zhang Xuan 张萱 (713-755)!³

A colophon was later added to Pu's painting by scholar Rao Zongyi who pointed out that Pu was mistaken in thinking that the subject he chose was of a concubine leaving the court. According to Rao, the depicted scene is actually Lady Guoguo's Spring Outing. The original painting by Li Gonglin is in the National Palace Museum in Taipei and can be used for verification (Fig. 1a).



Fig. 1
Pu Ru (1896-1963), *A Copy of the "Beauties on an Outing"* by Li Gonglin, Undated, 37 x 718.5cm. Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, Gift of the Tan family in memory of their late father, Dr Tan Tsze Chor



Fig 1a
Court Beauties on an Outing 丽人行, attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

THE TRADITION OF COPYING

Copying is a common method of art training in many cultures. This is especially so for the ancient tradition of Chinese painting also known as *maobi hua* 毛笔画 or *shuimo hua* 水墨画. The tools used for such paintings (ink and colour pigments applied with a brush on paper or silk) have remained largely unchanged over 3,000 years.

In China, copying is a commonly accepted means of learning painting and calligraphy. As early as the sixth century, Xie He 谢赫 had mentioned the copying of old masterpieces as one of the Six Laws or Principles of Chinese painting aesthetics.⁴ Closer to our time, there is a well-known episode in the 1940s when Zhang Daqian and Xie Zhiliu spent nearly a year to document the Dunhuang cave murals in Gansu province by painting life-size reproductions. Interestingly, the murals themselves were also the result of copying in ancient times. The paintings' outlines were initially pro-

duced through stencils. Relying on these stencilled outlines, Dunhuang artists then painted the final images directly on the walls. Zhang Daqian's remarkable copying skills have given rise to a number of enduring controversies. One of the most prominent is the case of *The Riverbank* – a painting attributed to the 10th century master Dong Yuan by its owner, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, but which some recent scholars have suggested is a modern fake by Zhang.⁵

In Chinese painting, a beginner usually learns by copying his teachers' brushwork and composition, and from studying extant masterpieces, reproductions and instruction manuals. Once he has attained a sound foundation, he is then expected to develop a personal language that is a synthesis or reinterpretation of past styles, and one that reflects his personality, temperament and character. This is not to say that Chinese artists do not observe nature or are inept in capturing physical likeness. For them, studying nature is a key ingredient in art, but copying is a proven method of studying how earlier artists translated the physical form and, more importantly, the spirit of the three-dimensional world onto the two-dimensional surface of a painting. Moreover, in an era when mechanical reproduction was not yet available, making hand-painted copies was the only way of circulating widely admired works amongst artists and collectors. For instance, Su Shih 苏轼 of the Song dynasty was known to have lent old paintings to friends who wanted to have copies made.⁶ Sometimes, artists even created copies as a joke or to test their friends' knowledge. And in a society where much respect is accorded to seniority and ancestry, artists have long been regarded as custodians and transmitters of culture and tradition. Hence, creating a work that refers to the past, especially the styles of great masters, signals an artist's intent to be included as



Detail of *Court Beauties on an Outing* 丽人行, attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

part of an illustrious lineage. In this way, making copies of paintings is seen as an exercise in virtuosity by artists who revere history. Pu's painting, with its declared connections to antiquity, is a clear example of such aspirations.

Generally, there are three ways to make copies. The first is to make an exact copy by tracing an existing work (known as *mo* 摹). This ensures that the entire composition and scale are reproduced very closely. However, because tracing has to be done slowly, the final brushwork may lack fluidity and a sense of spontaneity. The other way is to make a freehand copy by studying the original closely (known as *lin* 临). In this more technically demanding method, the artist has more freedom in his brushwork, but an exact copy is virtually impossible. The third category of 'copy' paintings refers to works done in the style of a particular artist but not based on any specific painting. For such works (sometimes known as imaginary copies), an artist creates a new composition in the style of another. In the hands of a skilful artist, it is possible to get a good copy very close to the style of the master with confident free-flowing brushwork. Two paintings in the Asian Civilisations Museum collection, *Landscape in the style of Huang Gongwang* by Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 and *Ink Plum Blossoms done in the style of Wang Mian* by Qian Du 钱杜, are good examples of such imaginary copies. (Figs. 2 and 3)

THE PROBLEM OF COPIES

The general acceptance and proliferation of copies in Chinese art have made it conducive for unscrupulous dealers and artists to pass off copies as originals. Some Chinese connoisseurs consider it impolite or inelegant to expose the works of forgers; as a result, certain fraudulent works continue to be circulated in the market.⁷ For instance, artist and connoisseur Xiao Ping (b. 1942) was once asked by a friend to write a colophon on a painting of chrysanthemums by Fu Baoshi (1904-1965) which he felt was a fake. However, as the collector was a senior official whom he did not wish to offend, Xiao penned a colophon based on a poem of chrysanthemums by Fu, without mentioning the quality of the painting. He had hoped that whoever read his colophon in the future would be able to read between the lines and understand that he had declined to give an opinion on the authenticity of the painting.⁸

Therefore, given the presence of an active art market, the existence of forgeries in China, as in other countries, is unsurprising. However, the circulation of copies is not only a problem for unwary collectors. It also poses challenges for curators and art historians who have to ascertain the authenticity of works in order to construct an accurate history of an artist's practice and in the process, establish a better understanding of Chinese art history.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF AUTHENTICATION

Generally, the task of authenticating involves close examination of two main aspects of a painting – dating and authorship. Firstly, one has to determine if the work comes from the period of its purported date. If undated, then the work should have been produced sometime during the artist's lifetime. This involves technical analysis to assess the age of the materials used in the painting. Advances in scientific analysis have made the results of such tests generally objective and incontrovertible. However, for authenticating recent paintings, especially those by 19th and 20th century artists, such tests are less helpful as forgers usually have little difficulty in obtaining raw materials which are still relatively plentiful today. Moreover, in a heated art market where demand for paintings exceeds supply, it is not inconceivable for copies of a famous artist's works to be produced and sold even during his lifetime, which makes it even more difficult to authenticate a work based on its age.

That said, the correct age does not necessarily mean that the painting is authentic. After the age of the materials has been verified, the next task is to determine if the artist is the author of the painting. An authenticator's conclusions are drawn after



Fig. 2 Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715), *Landscape in the style of Huang Gongwang*, 1711, 70.5 x 230.5 cm, Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Gift of the Tan family in memory of their late father, Dr Tan Tsz Chor.

looking closely at the painting and comparing it with authentic works. This requires the authenticator to have an intimate understanding of the artist's practice, down to details like the artist's favoured type of paper to the places he travelled to and the people he met during his lifetime. It also requires a sufficiently large number of reliably authentic works for comparison. This can be a problem with very old works as few original works prior to the Song dynasty have survived. Sometimes, an artist may produce two genuine works with the same subject matter but of different quality. This poses difficulties later on as authenticators will have to decide which of the two genuine works to use for comparison purposes. Similarly, forgers may sometimes forge the works of artists whose paintings are long-lost, hoping that such works could never be verified against authentic extant ones.⁹

AMBIGUOUS CASES

However, the question of what comes from the

artist's own hand is made murkier by paintings copied with the knowledge or authority of the artist. This has happened when the artist could not cope with high demand for his paintings and had to rely on students or relatives who could make relatively faithful copies to supply the needed works.¹⁰ The artist would complete the copy by writing the accompanying inscription and signature, with perhaps a few additional brushstrokes here and there to 'improve' the painting.¹¹

Equally controversial is the practice of separating a painting into two. Chinese paintings are usually done on paper made from multiple layers of pulp. For a sufficiently thick painting, a skilful mounter can divide the work into two by carefully separating the paper layers to produce two thinner sheets. This results in two identical paintings. Both layers bear the same image since the ink would have penetrated both layers during the painting process. The only slight difference is that the image on the top layer tends to be sharper and have richer tones than the one on the bottom.¹² However, it could be argued that both paintings remain authentic as they came from the artist's hands and no third party was involved in the painting process.

To complicate matters further, there are recorded instances when a famous artist such as Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636), whose works were very much in demand, sometimes even permitted his friends to use his name on their own works.¹³ Another similar episode recounts how an impoverished senior artist, too embarrassed to ask Zhang Daqian for a painting, once invited Zhang to paint a joint work, which the latter agreed. Zhang first painted the figures and the senior artist later added the landscape elements. For such a collaborative work, both artists would usually sign the painting. However, in this case, the senior artist did not sign and instead asked Zhang to write the inscription. Sympathetic to the senior artist's plight, Zhang complied with the request, even though he realised that the work could eventually be passed off as a painting done entirely by Zhang, and hence command a higher price as compared to a collaborative work.¹⁴

SPECIFIC METHODS OF AUTHENTICATION

1. The Materials Of The Painting

As mentioned, the first task is to determine if a work comes from the period that it purports to date from. If undated, then the painting should have been produced sometime during the artist's lifetime. A visual inspection is not sufficient as there are ways to create an aged or faded effect on new materials. For very old paintings, it is possible to send the paper or silk on which the painting is done, or the silk on which the painting is mounted, for scientific analysis. These tests usually provide a broad time period within which the paper or silk was made. Hence, they are more useful for authenticating older paintings rather than recent works. However, it should be noted that it is always possible for a resourceful forger to obtain old paper, silk and even ink sticks to make ink, and use them to create forgeries. This could extend to pulping blank pages from an old book to produce a piece of 'old' paper!¹⁵ Hence, even for genuinely old paintings, it is still necessary to determine if the painting was likely to have been painted by the artist.

For more recent works where the age of materials is not a useful guide of authenticity, an authenticator should be familiar with

Studying nature is a key ingredient in art, but copying is a proven method of studying how earlier artists translated the physical form and, more importantly, the spirit of the three-dimensional world onto the two-dimensional surface of a painting.

the types of paper, ink, seal paste and scroll mounting that the artist prefers or usually works with. Hence, a painting done on paper of a certain type would be suspect if the artist is not known to use that particular paper. However, such tests are never definitive. One can imagine a few possible scenarios where such anomalies may occur. For instance, the artist might have bought some new paper to try on but gave up after a few attempts. If those preliminary works survived, they would be hard to place within the artist's overall output, especially if the artist did not mention these attempts to anyone.

2. Scrutinising The Subject Matter

Once it is ascertained that the materials used are of the type that the artist is likely to have used, the next step is to determine if the subject matter of the painting is typical of the artist for that particular period of his career. In this case, the subject matter refers to all the visual elements found on the painting surface: the images (be it a landscape, bird and flower or human figures), the calligraphic inscriptions and signatures, and the seals.

In terms of the imagery, the authenticator should ascertain whether the artist is known to have painted certain subjects during a particular period. For instance, an artist may be known for painting landscapes but not for human figures. Likewise, the authenticator should also examine the calligraphic inscriptions, signatures and seals to see if they are typical of the artist for the period in question. For instance, some artists may change their signature or the type of seals they use as they get older. Hence, a painting is likely to be a forgery if it bears a signature or seal that is chronologically inconsistent with the artist's known practice. A careful reading of the inscriptions may also be helpful in authentication. For example, a careless forger may write an inscription purporting that the painting was a gift for a famous patron, but mistakenly include a date beyond the lifetime of the said patron.

3. Question Of Style

Even if the subject matter is typical, the



Fig. 3 (next page): Qian Du, *Ink Plum Blossoms done in the style of Wang Mian*, 1821, 218.0 x 49.5 cm, Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, Gift of the Tan family in memory of Dr Tan Tsze Chor.

authenticator then needs to determine if the manner or style of painting and writing is typical of the artist and corresponds to his known style for that particular period. This would involve comparing the work in question with known authentic paintings of the same period. In analysing painting and writing styles, emphasis is paid on the brushwork, use of ink and colour, and overall composition. Brushwork can be expressed in many ways – dry or wet, dense or sparse, thick or thin, light or heavy, broken or continuous, smooth or energetic, soft or angular – the permutations are endless. Likewise, the use of ink and colour can be similarly varied from light to dark, sparse to heavy. Composition may also be highly individualistic, balanced or asymmetrical, static or dynamic and so on. In terms of writing, it is important to compare the spacing between columns and characters to ascertain if there is a pleasing rhythm in the flow of characters and a balanced, harmonious composition. Such stylistic analysis is based on the assumption that most artists, though their styles may change with time, usually paint and write in a certain way for a particular period.

4. Determining Quality

Once it has been determined that the subject matter and style are consistent with the artist's, the next aspect – quality – is the most difficult to ascertain. There is a common assumption that great artists always create good work, and a work of an ordinary or mediocre standard can never come from his hands. From a great artist, most would demand forceful brushwork, confident calligraphy, lively imagery, and a harmonious, if not striking composition. These are qualities that can reasonably be expected from works produced at the peak of his career. However, this necessarily also implies that works completed at an earlier age (when the artist's skills were not yet fully honed or he was in transition between styles) or in his later years (when his physical faculties or energies were faltering) will understandably exhibit fewer of these desirable attributes. Forgers sometimes forge works from these periods precisely because authentic works created during those periods

do not bear the artist's mature style and will usually be accepted by collectors as being of secondary quality.¹⁶

In addition, a Chinese painting may be completed within a few hours, if not minutes. Hence, an artist could conceivably produce thousands of works in his lifetime. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect every single work to exhibit the same high standards. Inevitably, there will be works of a lower quality, perhaps produced when the artist was unwell, tired, uninspired or simply, socially obligated.

5. Tracking The Provenance

Lastly, after ascertaining that the age, subject, style and quality are consistent with the artist's works of that period, the authenticator can further verify the work's authenticity through its provenance, that is, the history of ownership of the work. This could be evident from the colophons – additional inscriptions – written by the painting's various owners, either on the painting itself or its silk mounting borders. This is an accepted practice where owners either impress their seals or write a short piece of text to signal their ownership and appreciation of the work. This could then be verified against painting inventories maintained by the same collectors, where available. Emperors like Huizong from the Song dynasty and Qianlong (r. 1735-1796) from the Qing dynasty were famous for their inventories and these have proven invaluable in authenticating many paintings. However, listings in such inventories alone are not very useful as these inventories were seldom illustrated. Moreover, many artists tended to paint similar subjects or give their paintings similar titles such as 'Fishing in the River' or 'Dwelling in the Mountains', thereby making verification through such listings problematic. In recent times, it has become possible to obtain some form of verification from recollections of direct witnesses. These could be students, family members, collectors or close friends of the artist who were present when the painting was completed. These same individuals, if reliable, could also provide valuable information to prove that the painting was unlikely to have been produced by

the artist. This is especially if they are privy to information that is not publicly known such as the artist's likes or dislikes, or his habits when painting.

DIFFICULTIES OF AUTHENTICATION

It is important to always keep in mind that authentication remains a subjective test. Apart from an artist's direct testimony, all other evidence will be circumstantial, and the conclusion can never be definitive. In some instances, it is even possible to question an artist's testimony, especially if his memory is failing or there are special circumstances where he may want to hide the truth. For instance, a Singapore art collector recounted that when the famous painter Guan Shanyue 關山月 (1912-2000) visited Singapore in 1986, he was asked by many local collectors to authenticate works in their collections. When confronted with fakes, Guan would make light of the awkward situation by joking that "I have painted numerous paintings over the decades, but I don't seem to remember having done this particular one. In any case, this artist can probably do a better job than I can!"¹⁷

After a thorough examination, the authenticator can, at most, opine that the painting is likely, very likely or unlikely to be the work of the artist. Even if the painting comes with a certificate of authenticity signed by the artist, there is no assurance that the work in question has not been replaced with a copy whilst in circulation. Generally, there are only a few instances when one can be reasonably certain that a work is genuine. They include works uncovered from archaeological sites, works obtained directly from the artist in his lifetime, and works donated by the artist to a public museum. In the latter case, it is then clear that the paintings did not have a chance to circulate in the open market where copies could be switched for originals.

Authentication requires very careful analysis and the application of any type of test will have to be done on a case-by-case basis. There are plenty of exceptions to the rule that have to be taken note of. For instance, when analysing a work based on an artist's subject type, it is helpful to know that an artist's subject preferences can change over time or he may favour several subjects concurrently. In addition, a landscape painter, pressured by a close friend or an important patron, may feel obliged to produce a portrait if faced with such a specific request. In such circumstances, it is understandable if the artist does not publicise the work's existence. Hence, the fact that such works are unknown does not conclusively prove that they are not authentic.

Likewise, it is inaccurate to assume that an artist only has one style of painting at any given period. A skilled artist could conceivably be proficient in several styles at the same time. For one occasion, he could paint a landscape in a spare style, done in pure ink with quick brushwork. For another occasion (or perhaps for a different patron), he could choose to depict the same landscape in a more decorative and elaborate style, full of colour and intricate detail. Sometimes, even stylistic analyses may not be very helpful. For instance, experts see little use in analysing Ming artist Qiu Ying's signature when authenticating his works as Qiu had felt that his calligraphy was inferior and often invited friends to sign his works for him.¹⁸

When analysing a painting's quality, it is important to keep in mind the possibility of authentic works of low quality. Although many artists would be loathe to sell or give away inferior works, sometimes low-quality but authentic works may still leak into the open market without their knowledge. For instance, it is known that Xu Beihong had a habit of practising painting and calligraphy every morning, and often discarded unsatisfactory works by throwing them aside. Unknown to Xu, some admirers retrieved some of these unsigned works as keepsakes which later surfaced in the open market with spurious signatures or seals added on.¹⁹ Strictly speaking, these works cannot be considered fakes. Therefore, it is useful to keep in mind that

a mediocre work does not necessarily mean that it is not authentic.

Lastly, just as the skills of authenticators increase over time, so have the abilities of resourceful forgers. For example, forgers are aware of the value placed on colophons for authentication. Hence, they are known to remove true colophons from original paintings and pair them with forged paintings in an attempt to give the fakes a veneer of pedigree. Similarly, a forger could also pair a fake colophon purportedly by a famous name with an authentic painting by a lesser name, in order to elevate the value of the painting.²⁰ Art historian James Cahill has highlighted that Zhang Daqian sometimes asked other artists, collectors and connoisseurs to write laudatory colophons for his copies so that they could be passed off as originals.²¹

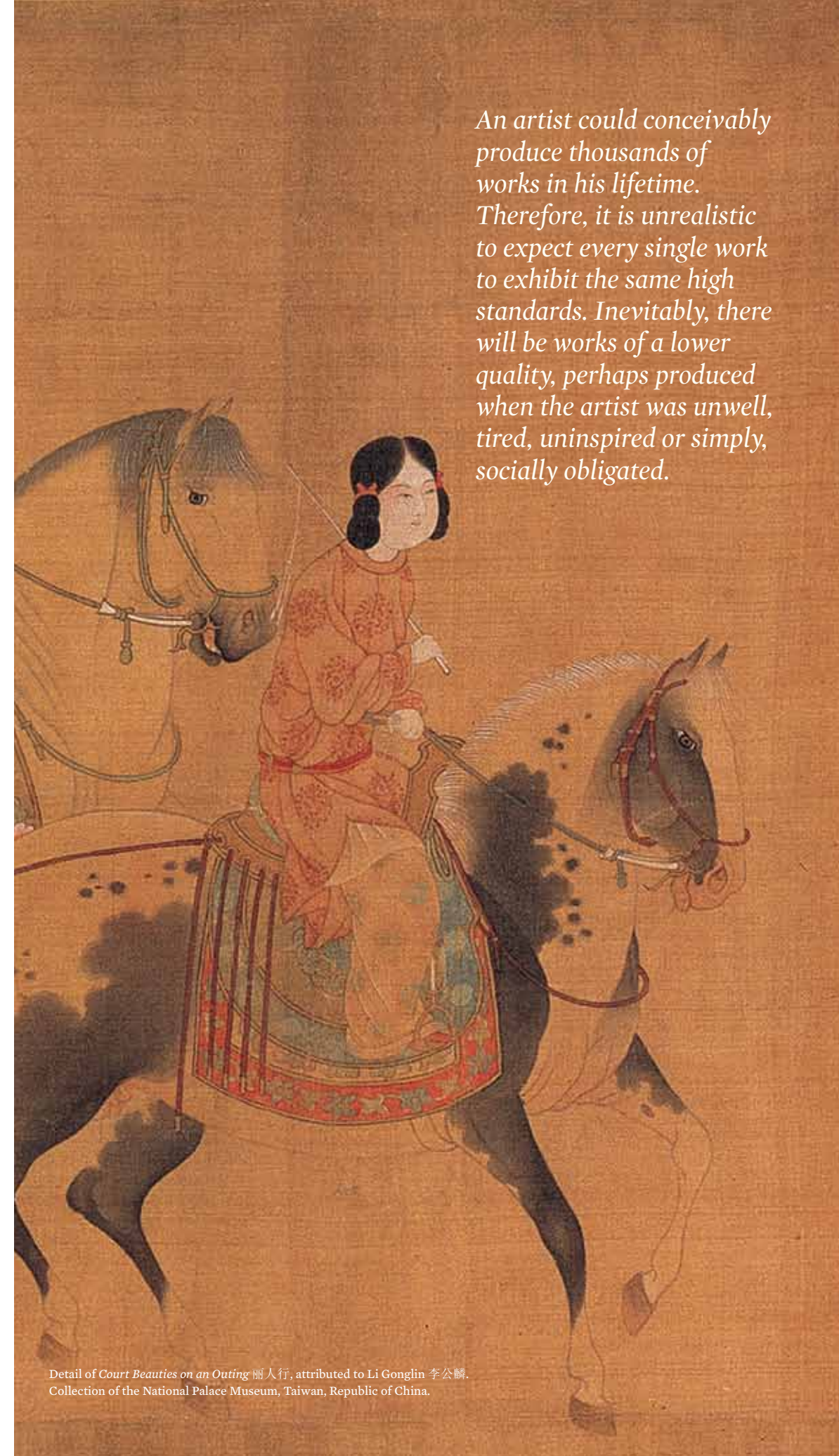
THE VALUE OF COPIES

However, at the end of the day, it should be noted that authentication is not just merely a case of comparison, trying to match and identify elements in order to expose a fake. The ability to authenticate a specific painting by an artist and place it in connection with the rest of his works contributes immeasurably to our understanding of the development of his practice. This, in turn, provides a more stable foundation on which to build a better understanding of Chinese art history. Lastly, it is important to keep in mind the advice of art historian Wang Yao-t'ing, who once highlighted that when confronted with a Ming copy of a Song painting, one could adopt two possible perspectives: it is a fake from the Song perspective but nevertheless, a genuine work from the Ming period.²² Hence, once the painting is returned to its proper context, there is still value in the work and much to be learnt from it.

Low Sze Wee is Deputy Director (Heritage), Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts.

Notes.

1. *BeMUSE* April-June 2010, Vol. 3 Issue 02, National Heritage Board, Singapore.
2. The painting *Court Beauties on an Outing* 丽人行, attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟, is in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.
3. The painting *Lady Guoguo on a Spring Outing* 徽宗夫人游春, attributed to Song emperor Huizong 徽宗, is in the collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum in China.
4. The Six Laws are: Spirit Resonance 气韵生动 (vitality), Bone Method 骨法用笔 (structural strength in using the brush), Correspondence to the Object 应物象形 (fidelity to object), Suitability to Type 随类赋彩 (correct application of colour), Division and Planning 经营位置 (proper composition, space and depth) and Transmission by Copying 传移模写 (transmission of ancient masters by copying).
5. The authenticity of the painting was the subject of a one-day symposium titled "Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting" held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in December 1999.
6. Wang, Yao-t'ing, *Looking at Chinese Painting*. Tokyo: Nigensha Publishing Co. Ltd, 2000, p.108.
7. Morse, Earl. "On Collecting Chinese Painting" in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp.157-158.
8. Du Nanfa 杜南发 (Toh Lam Huat), *隔岸看山 Ge'an kanshan (Looking at the Mountain Across the Bank)*. Shanghai: 上海书店出版社 Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2010, p.51
9. *Original or Copy: How to Authenticate Chinese Paintings*. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2000, p.48.
10. There is the Ming dynasty account of a collector who asked an artist to produce an unsigned landscape painting so that the former could ask the renowned artist Dong Qichang to sign on the same work. (Wang Yao-t'ing, p.113)
11. Qi Baishi's son Qi Ziru specialised in painting insects in the style of his father, and is said to have painted almost all of his father's paintings of insects in his later years. (Original or Copy, pp. 70-71).
12. Singapore artist and gallery owner Tan Teo Kwang knew of a scroll mounter in Singapore called Qiu Zhenxiang 邱珍祥 who could do this and had seen him at work. So long as the original painting was done on paper that was more than single ply, and the painting had not been mounted yet, Qiu could split the work into two. Incidentally, Qiu was the mounter whom Xu Beihong used in Singapore in the early 1940s, and Qiu had recounted to Tan that Xu occasionally asked him to split his paintings, especially for works which Xu had wanted to keep a copy for himself. (Interview with Tan Teo Kwang on 16 Dec 2010; For an account of Qiu's relationship with Xu, see Ouyang Xingyi 欧阳兴义, *Beihong zai nanyang 悲鸿在南洋*. Singapore: Yishu gongzuoshi 艺术工作室, 1999, pp.157-160).
13. *Original or Copy*, p. 24.
14. Du Nanfa, p. 247
15. Wang Yao-t'ing, p.116.
16. *Original or Copy*, p.9.
17. Lam, Pin Foo. "The Tranquility and Poetic Charm of Chinese Paintings July 1" in <http://lampinfoo.wordpress.com/2008/07/01/the-tranquility-and-poetic-charm-of-chinese-paintings/>
18. *Original or Copy*, p.23.
19. *Recollection of Zhuang Jiaxun 庄家训 (Ouyang Xingyi, p.181)*.
20. *Original or Copy*, p.50.
21. Cahill, James. *Riverbank as a Chang Dai-chien Forgery*. CLP 53:2002. <http://jamescahill.info/r11.85.145.shtml>
22. Wang Yao-t'ing, p.108.



Detail of *Court Beauties on an Outing* 丽人行, attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.



Facing page: MEXICO. State of Morelos. Shy sugar cane cutter. 1984. © Abbas / Magnum Photos
Above: SOUTH AFRICA. Cape Town. Baptism in the sea. 1999. © Abbas / Magnum Photos

*“Isn’t photo-graphy “writing with light”?
But with the difference that while the writer possesses his
word, the photographer is himself possessed by his photo,
by the limit of the real which he must transcend so as not
to become its prisoner.”*

– ABBAS

from Crisis to Faith

ABBAS' 45 YEARS
IN PHOTOGRAPHY



[The founding of Magnum Photos, was] “to allow us, and in fact to oblige us, to bring testimony on our world and contemporaries according to our own ability and interpretations”.

– Henri Cartier-Bresson

point of view of a single magazine or newspaper editor. They turned to books and exhibitions, which became an excellent way of letting photographers express themselves, and these in turn increased the value of the works and extended the boundaries of photojournalism such that the photographers became more like ‘artists’.

A photograph possesses greater value and significance when viewed collectively with other photographs in a series and in in-depth essays.³ Abbas recognises this and he also deems words necessary and central to his photo essays. His text, written in a journal style, often accompanies his photos to present his point of view. As Abbas reveals, “my work is very subjective, my books are very subjective”.⁴

Abbas’ firsthand account of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 is shared in two publications: *Iran – La Révolution Confisquée* (‘Iran – The Revolution Stolen’, 1980) and *Iran Diary 1971-2002* (2002). The former is a photo reportage of the revolution that overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) and established the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1989), while the latter takes the form of a photographic journal accompanied by a private account and interpretation of Iranian history. Abbas’ documentation of the growing unrest in Iran was important because the Iranians did not trust their media. In Iran, he was even encouraged to take photos of the women as the militants wanted to show the women’s involvement in the revolution. Even though there were times when he had to hand over his film to the police, it did not stop him from covering the revolution until a drastic turn of events, among which was the hostage-taking of 52 American diplomats by the Islamists in the US embassy for 444 days.

With the words, “it wasn’t my revolution anymore – I was a concerned photographer but nothing more”⁵, Abbas left Iran in 1980 and started a voluntary 17-year exile. His Iranian friends had warned him not to return to Iran as his book *Iran – La Révolution Confisquée* had been confiscated by the mullahs⁶. He missed out on the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988) and only returned to Iran in

Facing page: ZAIRE. Kinshasa. Muhammad Ali avoids a punch by George Foreman during the World Heavyweight Championship. 1974. © Abbas / Magnum Photos. Top right: UNITED KINGDOM. Belfast. A wall crumbles down, a presumed act of arson by the IRA. 1972. © Abbas / Magnum Photos. Right: VIETNAM. A Vietcong guerrilla in an area ‘liberated’ from the US-supported regime. 1973. © Abbas / Magnum Photos.



A

By Wong Hwei Lian

Abbas Attar, an Iranian born in 1944 who later moved to Paris, is one of the 81 members of Magnum Photos, a prestigious photo agency at the forefront of global photojournalism and known for the ability to “transcend ‘the artificial life’ and explore life’s realities”¹. Abbas started his career by documenting socio-political conflicts in Biafra, Bangladesh, Northern Ireland, Vietnam, the Middle East, South America, and South Africa. His photographs are documents of historical evidence – they have recorded the poor living conditions after the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970); captured the moments leading to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971; covered the bombings of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA)

in 1972; and followed the exploits of the Vietcong during the Vietnam War in 1973.

Apart from these political events, Abbas also had the opportunity as a young photojournalist to photograph numerous well-known personalities. One of them was 20th century sports icon, Muhammad Ali (b. 1942), with whom Abbas travelled to Kinshasa, Zaire in 1974 to document one of the greatest upsets in sporting history, the so-called ‘Rumble in the Jungle’. Abbas followed Ali on his training sessions and captured the important moments of his fight with the hitherto unbeatable George Foreman for the boxing World Heavyweight Championship title. Ali secured his victory after knocking out Fore-

man in the eighth round.

Such documentation of world events by photojournalists was of great importance to magazines in the 1970s, a period which saw periodicals relying on photographs to fill page after page. But at the same time, photographs were also used in a decorative manner ill-befitting of the serious subject and tone of the images. The founding of Magnum Photos, according to a 1962 memo by Henri Cartier-Bresson, was “to allow us, and in fact to oblige us, to bring testimony on our world and contemporaries according to our own ability and interpretations”². Through their work, Magnum photographers articulated the complexity of the world, not the



1997. His work on the Iranian Revolution seemed to be his last as a true photojournalist.⁷ But during the years of self-exile, he never stopped travelling or photographing. Between 1983 and 1986, Abbas made nine trips to Mexico. The resulting photographs, emblematic of documentation raised to the level of art, were the results of a cultural adventure. With no major events to cover in Mexico, he had embarked on a spiritual and aesthetic search that revealed a struggle between tradition and modernity, amid other conflicts, within the country. The trip presented Abbas with the opportunity to work on his aesthetics in photography, and share his experiences and insights in his book, *Return to Mexico* (1992). This Mexi-

can adventure might well have served as a short interlude in Abbas' photojournalistic journey, giving him time to meditate on religious issues.

Abbas was well aware that the events in Iran were not going to be contained within her borders. The resurgence of Islam was making waves around the world and Abbas was ready to work on this subject after his sojourn to Mexico. For seven years, beginning in 1987, he crossed four continents and travelled to 29 countries – from Xinjiang to Morocco and from Paris to Timbuktu – driven by the desire to understand the internal tensions and conflicts underlying Muslim societies caught between religion and the

wish for modernisation. While the Islamic world shares the belief, *Allah O Akbar* ('God is Great'), his work showed the dichotomies present within these societies – tradition versus modernisation, moderation versus militancy. Abbas' interest in God is not about man's faith, but what man does and has done in the name of God. This became more evident in *In Whose Name? The Islamic World after 9/11*, in which he raises the fundamental question, "How does Islam, a religion, sustain a political ideology – Islamism?"

When terrorists attacked the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001, Abbas was documenting animistic practices

in Siberia. When he caught the incident on television, he first thought that the shaman he had been photographing had played with his mind, causing him to hallucinate. Having spent seven years documenting Islam prior to animism, he realised that he could not turn his back on the religion and its impacts after what the jihadists had committed in America. His work on polytheism and animism, which included the shamans of Siberia, voodoo practices in Haiti and Cuba, the Dogons in Mali and Japan's Shinto cult, had to be abandoned.

Abbas' photos of pilgrims at Hajj, young Muslims in Islamic schools, militants who use Islam as a political ideology, and terror-

ists who "justify every fatwa⁸ with quotations from the Qur'an and the Sunna"⁹, show a combination of spirituality, rituals, politics and extremism. Abbas also began to explore other faiths, chiefly Christianity, Judaism and more recently, Buddhism, with the same sceptical and critical eye. Between 1995 and 2000, Abbas worked on Christian communities. Instead of separating the three monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, he threaded them into a single exhibition and book of the title, *Children of Abraham* (2006), as the patriarch 'Abraham' is claimed by both Christians and Muslims to be the 'common' ancestor in their history. Today he continues his research on different communities to learn how religion can lead

to fanaticism and extreme actions.

Abbas' dedication in documenting diverse political and social conditions over the past 45 years reflects his interest in the world and his vision, just as his photos of Islam reflect "his vision of Islam"¹⁰. His works have generated many questions, many unanswerable. While we may get the point he puts across in his writings, we are expected to make our own judgment, form our own opinions and perhaps change the way we see the world. This is only his first 45 years in photography. More await us.

Wong Hwei Lian is Curator (Exhibitions) at the National Museum of Singapore.

Above: SAUDI ARABIA. Arafat. The Hajj pilgrimage. 1992. © Abbas / Magnum Photos
Facing page: IRAN. Tehran. Inside a fashionable coffee house. 2001. © Abbas / Magnum Photos

Abbas' interest in God is not about man's faith, but what man does and has done in the name of God.

ENDNOTES:

1. *Magnum Photos* (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008).
2. *Magnum Photos*.
3. *Magnum Stories*, ed. Chris Boot (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2004), 11.
4. Abbas, interview held during the *Visa pour L'Image* photojournalism festival at Perpignan, France, 2009.
5. Diane Smyth, 'Revolution in Iran', *British*

Journal of Photography, <http://www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/report/1646861/revolution-iran> (1 April 2009).
6. Mullah refers to a learned Muslim man, educated in the religious law and doctrine, and usually holds an official post.
7. *Magnum Stories*, 11.
8. A fatwa is an Islamic ruling issued by recognised religious authorities.

9. *Arms against Fury: Magnum Photographers in Afghanistan*, ed. Robert Dannin (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 190.
10. Abbas, interview held during the *Visa pour L'Image* photojournalism festival at Perpignan, France, 2009.

Press, 1994.
Abbas. *In Whose Name? The Islamic World after 9/11*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2009.
Abbas. *Children of Abraham*. Paris: Intervalles, 2006.
Boot, Chris (ed.). *Magnum Stories*. London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2004.
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Magnum Degrees. London: Phaidon Press, 2000.
Magnum Photos. London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008.
Smyth, Diane, "Revolution in Iran," *British Journal of Photography*, <http://www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/report/1646861/revolution-iran>.

GERALDINE JAVIER

*ELLA AMO' APASIONADAMENTE Y FUE
CORRESPONDIDA (FOR SHE LOVED FIERCELY,
AND SHE IS WELL LOVED)*

2010

Oil on canvas and framed embroidery with preserved butterflies
228.5 x 160 cm



Initially trained as a nurse, Geraldine Javier is considered one of the Philippines' foremost contemporary artists who paint in a hyper-realist mode. Javier brings a methodical approach to her paintings, which are often characterised by a sombre, melancholic air and mesmerising beauty. Her works reveal a fascination with beauty and death, and life's transient beauty is explored in this painting containing ten framed cushions embroidered with flowers or caterpillars, each holding a preserved butterfly. *Ella Amo' Apasionadamente* ostensibly depicts the famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, who produced over 50 self-portraits that captured and dramatised the severe physical and emotional pain she endured in life – personal traumas played out on canvas before a 'voyeuristic' art public. Crucially, Kahlo stands out in art history as the one female artist who was the most instrumental in creating her own iconic image, in physical likeness and as a symbol of 'female suffering'. It was passion and pain intertwined that characterised much of Kahlo's personal and artistic life, and arguably one that Javier herself identifies with and romanticises. Many of Javier's paintings depict young girls or women (occasionally in poses of rigor mortis), which may be seen as Javier's projection of the self – self-portraits of sorts that explore the difficult relationship she has with an aggressive art market. Centred amidst a profusion of flowers, Kahlo/Javier averts her gaze from the public and stands immortal as an icon of beauty and sorrow – a queen in a twilight paradise.