

LOOK BACK IN WONDER

We delve into Singapore's growing interest in heritage. ■ MELANIE LEE

IN

Last year's SG50 celebrations saw a heavy focus on Singapore's historical milestones with a wide array of heritage-related walks, talks and events, as well as the opening and upgrading of several museums.

Says Chew Keng Kiat, a freelance project manager who runs the Singapore Heritage Short Film Competition, "The government has done a great job in promoting heritage with all these programmes, and many people are interested in attending them because they help them see things differently about their country."

Kennie Ting, group director of Museums and Development at the National Heritage Board defined heritage in his book *Heritage* (part of the *Singapore Chronicles* series) as "the question of what we do in the present with what has been left



IT ALL ADDS UP "The knowledge of Singapore history is evolving, so there are always new things to discover," says volunteer guide Chew Keng Kiat.

for us from the past".

And obviously, these days, a lot more is being done with things from the past. Professor John Miksic, who has been doing archaeology work in Singapore since 1984, sees "major changes" in how people view history in recent years. "When I came, there was little interest. But in 2010, the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute asked me to head an Archaeology Unit, and Archaeology is now integrated into the Secondary One Social Studies curriculum," he says.

In a way, appreciating local heritage is an important part of understanding one's identity. Cheryl-Ann Low, a former curator who is currently an archaeological illustrator, describes her love for Singapore history as "a key to understanding many things in my life — family, community and environment".

PAST CONTINUOUS

However, according to these history buffs, there's still a long way to go in terms of getting Singaporeans in sync with the country's past.

Chew, who attends many heritage events, believes there is still plenty of room for improvement in terms of the quality of such programmes.

"Many of these events only present a very basic level of history, which I think doesn't do justice to the fact that while Singapore has a short history, a lot has happened during this period," he observes.

Taking this further, Professor Miksic hopes that the common historical narrative of Singapore will stretch way before the British arrival in 1819. His findings while excavating in areas such as Fort Canning and the Padang show Singapore was already a prosperous port town 700 years ago.

"There's so much evidence of ancient trade and a ruling kingdom here. Even before being colonised, the population was a diverse mix of people from the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, China, South Asia,



PHOTO: John Miksic

STEP BACK "Archaeology is the best antidote to ignorance about the nature of the past," says Professor John Miksic.

PHOTO Cheryl-Ann Low



GROWTH SPURT
“Singapore’s heritage is vibrant and has grown as an industry with more researchers, writers, and curators,” observes former curator Cheryl-Ann Low.

Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar and the Philippines. Singapore has always been a place that depended on cooperation between people from different ethnic origins.”

Low, who co-edited history book *Early Singapore* with Miksic and is currently illustrating archaeological sherds at his laboratory, agrees. “It’s vital for people to understand that the history of Singapore goes back centuries. There is evidence of what people made and where they lived, along with evidence of battles that took place in the sea.”

HERITAGE HIGHS

Chew believes that appreciating local heritage is a “dynamic process”. For example, as a volunteer guide at Bukit Brown Cemetery, he and his fellow guides make it a point to regularly update their tour content as new research about the site unfolds.

“In that sense, even if you revisit a historic place or monument, there will always be new things to learn,” he adds.

Low, who is a mother of a six year-old girl, feels it is important to develop a “sense of very long ago” from a young age. “I don’t conscientiously tell my daughter about history, but I do tell her about what she was like when she was a baby, and what I was like when I was a baby. I also guide her to respect elders and consider what to do with old things,” she says. **A**

PHOTOS: Joel Low ART DIRECTION: Tony Law STYLING: Lirong ASSISTED BY: Wayne Phua HAIR: Alicia Tey MAKEUP: Shaun Lee CLOTHES: Julie wears silk linen-blend blouse from In Good Company. Bangle & ring from Forever 21. Ali wears cotton stretch polo tee from Lacoste.

It’s My Life!

Our cover models share what Singapore heritage means to them.

JULIE WEE

ACTRESS & VOICEOVER ARTIST

FAVOURITE BIT OF SINGAPORE HISTORY?

I’ve been researching Singapore’s history because I was working on *Wild Rice’s Hotel* which spans a century of our past. I still remember The Great Singapore Workout of 1993 — we were all forced to do this silly routine as students and I still remember its catchy song!

WHAT DOES SINGAPORE HERITAGE MEAN TO YOU?

My father is Chinese-Filipino. My mother was born to Scottish parents and lived in England. I was born and raised in Singapore, and yet, at least once a month, a stranger will exclaim, “Wah, you’re Singaporean, ah?” This frustrates me as it sounds like they are surprised I belong to their world. I tell such people that Singaporeans come in all shapes and sizes now.



ALI ANWAR

ACTOR

FAVOURITE BIT OF SINGAPORE HISTORY?

Deepa Raya in 2005 (when Deepavali and Hari Raya took place around the same time). I vividly remember people in colourful traditional outfits with pots of *biryani* or *lontong* in their hands... everyone had warm smiles.

WHAT DOES SINGAPORE HERITAGE MEAN TO YOU?

I remember watching an old clip of P Ramlee’s song ‘Achi Achi Buka Pintu’ and thought how special it was to have Malays playing a pair of Indian lovers for a Chinese production house (Shaw Brothers). This sense of multiculturalism is something that has been cultivated for decades.



CLOTHES Weish wears chiffon drape dress from Zara. Bangle from H&M. Khairudin wears cotton classic-fit polo tee from Lacoste.

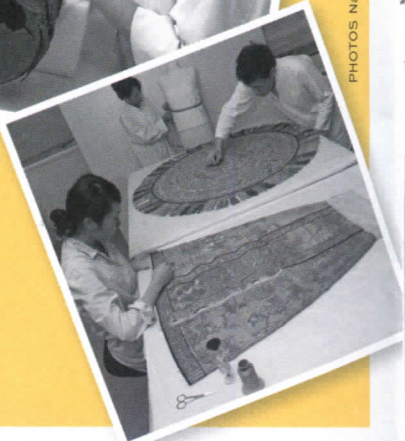
WEISH MUSICIAN
FAVOURITE BIT
OF SINGAPORE
HISTORY?

I was particularly excited with the success of Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. It made the bestseller lists on Amazon and *The New York Times* earlier this year. Likewise, I also think it's a great milestone for Singapore literature that the works of Alfian Sa'at, Boey Kim Cheng and Arthur Yap are being studied at universities in Britain, United States and India.
WHAT DOES SINGAPORE HERITAGE MEAN TO YOU? Swee Choon *dim sum*, *sarabat teh tarik*, Rochor Road *tau hvey*, Katong laksa, Adam Road *nasi lemak*, Jalan Kayu *roti prata*, Tian Tian chicken rice....



EVER WONDERED

where all the museum artefacts get primed and polished for exhibitions? The **HERITAGE CONSERVATION CENTRE (HCC)**, all the way at Jurong Port Road, is where conservators are hard at work restoring heirlooms and collectibles in varying stages of disrepair. This helps to prolong the shelf life of our treasures, and minimises the effects of light, humidity, pollution and mishandling. HCC is also the custodian of the National Heritage Board museum collection, and has storage facilities plus an Artefact Image Library.



PHOTOS: National Heritage Board

KHAIRUDIN SAHAROM

ARCHITECT & MEDIA PERSONALITY
FAVOURITE BIT OF SINGAPORE HISTORY? When Lee Kuan Yew first planted the Mempat tree in 1963 to launch a tree-planting campaign. This was the start of Singapore's evolution to a Garden City, and this legacy remains today. From the minute you step out of Changi Airport, there is greenery all around us. Even in HDB flats, residents personalise their corridor spaces with plants. It has become a part of us.



WHAT DOES SINGAPORE HERITAGE MEAN TO YOU?

It goes beyond the festivities, colourful decorations and food. To me, it's about an appreciation of who we are and how we live. The root lies in respecting different cultures and from there, the beauty of everyday life comes about.

PHOTO Deanna Ng



“Big museums are great when you want an overview of art or history, but I also enjoy small museums that specialise in a specific artist, culture or period of history. It’s stimulating to dive deep into one topic that appears to be

narrow, but in fact, opens up whole other worlds of cultural experience.” — YU-MEI BALASINGAMCHOW, WRITER & CURATOR

Heritage Gems

These small museums are big on history.

CHINATOWN HERITAGE CENTRE

Get an intimate glimpse into early migrant life in Chinatown with personal stories from a tailor, trishaw rider, *samsui* woman and hawkler. The centre reopened after a facelift earlier this year, and visitors can expect enhanced multisensory features such as soundscapes, interactive touchscreens and olfactory experiences.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: CHINATOWNHERITAGECENTRE.COM.SG

PHOTOS: Chinatown Heritage Centre Pte Ltd



MALAY HERITAGE CENTRE

Housed in the former palace of the Johore Sultanate, this museum focuses on the history of Kampong Glam as well as Singapore’s connections to the wider Malay region. It recently launched an exhibition on the local Javanese community, which is on till 28 August.

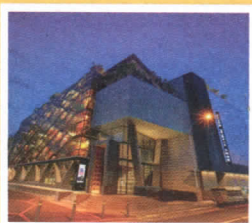
FOR MORE INFORMATION: MALAYHERITAGE.ORG.SG

PHOTOS: National Heritage Board

INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

Located in the historical district of Little India, the Indian Heritage Centre traces the history of the South Asian community in Singapore and Southeast Asia from the first to the 21st century. There are over 400 artefacts housed here, most notably an authentic 19th-century wooden Chettinad doorway with intricate religious motifs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: INDIANHERITAGE.ORG.SG



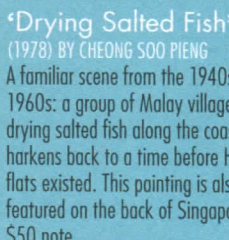
ART WITH A PAST

The National Gallery Singapore houses local artworks that capture iconic scenes from our past.

“These pieces of art capture perspectives on life, society and the world at any one point or a period in time. Granted, individual perspectives are subjective. But from a historical viewpoint, each piece of art symbolically embodies and reflects what life and the world could have meant for the artist, and what these works of art could mean for us today.” — SHABIR MUSTAFA, SENIOR CURATOR, NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE



“National Language Class” (1959) BY CHUA MIA TEE
Painted in the year Singapore attained self-governance, this nationalistic piece depicts the significant move by the government to foster unity by designating Malay as the new national language.



“Drying Salted Fish” (1978) BY CHEONG SOO PIENG
A familiar scene from the 1940s to 1960s: a group of Malay villagers drying salted fish along the coast harkens back to a time before HDB flats existed. This painting is also featured on the back of Singapore’s \$50 note.



“Singapore Waterfront” (1963) BY GEORGETTE CHEN
The flowing currents of the Singapore River are given a sensuous and light quality, while in-construction architecture is captured in the horizon. It exudes a sense of hope in an ever-changing urban landscape.



“Life by the River” (1975) BY LIU KANG
This semi-abstract oil painting depicts the lightheartedness and joy of living in a Pasir Panjang kampung.



“The Barber” (1982) BY ONG KIM SENG
A poignant watercolour piece that captures a once-prevalent scene of a barber working along a five-foot way. It records one of Singapore’s vanishing old trades.



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PHOTOS: Collection of National Gallery Singapore

PHOTOS: National Heritage Board