



A New Take on Multicultural Exhibits: The Asian Civilisations Museum

by Claire Pillsbury

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The island of the Republic of Singapore, located between Malaysia and Indonesia, is only about 3.5 times the size of Washington DC. Despite its small size, Singapore has an exceptionally diverse population. Its location, in the shortest sea route between China and India, makes it a crossroads for Asian cultures and international trade. With a population made up of Chinese (Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Cantonese), Malays, Indians (Tamil, Bengali, Punjabis, Kashmiri), and other ethnic groups, Singapore has a long history of diversity.

The complex heritage of Singapore is explored and celebrated in an expanded facility and new exhibits at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum. The four thematic areas—Southeast Asia, China, West Asia, and South Asia—are further subdivided into the many geographically or religiously defined groups that play a role in Singapore's past and present.

The opening gallery, The Singapore River Gallery, explores the pivotal role of trade, weather cycles and geography in Singapore's identity. A video presentation about the annual cycle of the "Trade Winds" brings alive a map of Singapore and its surrounding sea routes. The gallery features a range of personal information and factual content, including a view of the water, poems about the river from local writers, and oral histories and archival footage of turn-of-the-century boat races. This interweaving of the objective and the subjective allows each visitor to discover for themselves the connections between the past and the present, the British colonists and the Asian communities, and the different Asian communities with each other.

A respectful appreciation of Singapore's diversity is evident when visitors encounter the date designations of ACE and BCE on descriptive labels. These acronyms correspond to the traditional dating of AD and BC, but the lettering stands for "Before Common Era" and "After Common Era." BCE and ACE are considered more appropriate and inclusive for a population that includes Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Taoist and Confucianist believers.

The numerous opportunities for immediate engagement keep the vast content and scope from becoming overwhelming. Rather than relying on dispassionate "equal time" synopses of each culture in large introductory graphic walls, the museum used digital media, allowing people to represent their own diversity. Sixteen virtual hosts are available on small computer kiosk stands positioned at gallery entrances. All are modern-day Singaporean adults in their 20s through 40s, and each represents one of the different ethnic groups that make up Singapore's population. Subdued in comparison to the typical attention-demanding virtual host, these do not speak until a visitor initiates interaction via the touch screen menu. Each host offers reflections on their personal history and what their cultural identity means to them, their family, and how they view their future. Their commentaries, in everyday, conversational language, relate to the themes and objects in their gallery, but they do not present themselves as experts. However, the menu of scripted commentary is quite extensive, and lingering visitors have the option of drilling down the branching topics. At these deeper levels, the hosts relate more information about historical background, or describe the artistic style of objects on display. The unintimidating tone and authenticity of the host encourages casual and thoughtful exploration of the gallery.



Another welcome interpretive strategy is the availability of short video clips, providing the back story on particular artistic traditions or showing objects in use. Small video kiosks are strategically stationed in those galleries that display large collections of a single category of object, such as musical instruments, jewelry or calligraphy. The gallery of Islamic calligraphy contains two video kiosks to attract visitors and provide enough lively and relevant information to support an appreciative observation of the collection. One video kiosk is dedicated to the traditional Islamic art of paper marbling. An expert craftsman explains the symbolism as he drops colored ink onto the tray of water and carefully “slices” through to make the luscious swirls, leaves and tulip patterns. The other kiosk profiles a third-generation calligrapher. As he sketches possible layouts he describes his method of developing appropriately evocative designs for words, names or passages from the Koran. The intricacies of these layouts can include words within letters, or phrases contoured into a symbolic shape. Even without previous interest in this art or the ability to read Arabic, viewing and hearing these practitioners greatly enhances the experience of exploring the displayed calligraphy. In another gallery, short video clips of expert players and instrument-makers enliven a vast collection of musical instruments from India. And a static display of colorful religious processional costumes and effigies comes to life in the archival footage of those objects in outdoor street ceremonies in Singapore.

Finally, multi-media technology creates stunning immersive environments to exhibit difficult-to-access architectural spaces. While the typical recreation of a period room has a red velvet rope holding visitors back, at the Asian Civilisations Museum images projected on the floor, wall, and ceiling display and surround you with the marvelous beauty and intricate aesthetics of a mosque. Visitors are encouraged to remove their shoes and “enter” by kneeling or sitting on the projected tiled floor image, thus experiencing the interiors of these awe-inspiring spaces. The images softly transition to another mosque every few minutes. This magical virtual tour allows non-Muslims to experience the typical motifs and spectacular designs of this architecture.

The Asian Civilisations Museum’s mission statement, “to inspire the discovery of selves and others,” is carried out for the widest possible audience with their commitment to affective and intellectual access. The variety of engaging experiences throughout the exhibit environment makes exploration comfortable for visitors of all backgrounds. The innovative experiential media techniques are inspiring models for modern, evocative methods of interpreting multi-cultural collections, history and content.



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