

A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY:

Revamping the National Museum of Singapore for the Golden Jubilee Year

Angelita Teo
Director, National Museum of Singapore

With contributions from the National Museum
of Singapore's Curatorial and Exhibitions team:
Iskander Mydin, Priscilla Chua, Sharon Lim,
Jervais Choo and Stephanie Yeo

In 2015, the momentous milestone of 50 years of Singapore's independence was celebrated nationwide as the Golden Jubilee Year. This year-long celebration was also known as "SG50". The contributions of the Pioneer Generation (a term used to describe Singaporeans who were 16 years or older in 1965) were recognised and celebrated alongside the achievements and aspirations of a new generation of Singaporeans born after the early nation-building years of the 1960s and 1980s. Perhaps at no other time over the last 50 years was there such widespread public awareness of local historical and heritage matters as in the past year. With the prevalence of museums and galleries reaching out to diverse audiences, history and heritage in the age of social media became something to be acknowledged, cherished and shared beyond mere recall or reminiscence.

Creating a connection

In this landscape, the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) underwent a major revamp of its permanent exhibition galleries, which subsequently re-opened in September 2015. The revamp was an inclusive process as it involved not only the museum team and consultants but also external parties from the SG50 sub-committees and academics in advisory panels. As a result, a guiding narrative of how the museum would shape its presentation of Singapore's history in its permanent galleries was conceptualised. This "seed narrative" also served to facilitate the content and development of the galleries.

The aim of the narrative was to create an emotional and personal connection with Singapore's history among museum visitors. As narratives are inherently stories, the presentation of Singapore's history in the galleries was approached in a similar manner. In telling the story of our nation, it also helped to define a sense of national identity and connectedness with our roots and legacies. It was also value-driven, since narratives can be viewed as enclosing moral imperatives or moral tales. Our values arising from the lessons and experiences drawn from Singapore's history include beliefs or principles such as being adaptable, pioneering, creative, tenacious, cherishing our families, embracing the spirit of

gotong royong ("mutual help" in Malay), fair play, protecting what we had built and being open to cultural and religious diversity.

Maintaining historical continuity

Although much of the focus of the revamp was on the post-independence period from 1965 to the 2000s which coincided with SG50, it was imperative that we also included the earlier pre-colonial, colonial and wartime periods of Singapore's history, which were covered in the galleries during the previous major revamp in 2006. These sections have been re-aligned to present a sense of historical continuity with the later post-independence period.

This sense of continuity is expressed in the revamped galleries on the two levels of the museum. The Singapore History Gallery (SHG) on Level One presents the main narrative of Singapore's history from the pre-colonial period to current times through the perspectives of key events, milestones and personalities. Chronologically, it covers the following sections: Singapura (1299—1818), Crown Colony (1819—1942), Syonan-To (1942—1945), A Nation in the Making (1945—1960s), Building an Economy (1960s—1970s), Building a Home (1970s—1980s), and Transforming the Landscape (1980s—2000s). Together, they capture the nation's defining moments, challenges and achievements from its earliest beginnings 700 years ago to the independent, modern city-state it is today.

On Level Two, four other galleries present snapshot narratives of Singapore's social and cultural history, using personal perspectives to complement the main narrative on Level One. Known collectively as the Life in Singapore: The Past 100 Years galleries, the individual galleries are named Modern Colony (1920s—1930s), Surviving Syonan (1942—1945), Growing Up (1950s—1960s) and Voices of Singapore (1970s—1980s). They take a closer look at social modes of living in the colonial era, personal struggles during the war, a generation's dreams and aspirations, and self-expression and creativity in the formation of a Singaporean identity respectively. Collectively, they provide visitors with glimpses into a century of Singaporean lives, manners, behaviour, values

and dreams, adding a multi-dimensional layer to the singularity of the mainstream narrative in the SHG. In short, they present the evolution of a nation's "character and soul" over the years. In keeping with the nature of snapshots, these galleries have been conceived as semi-permanent to be rotated in the future to cover other thematic snapshots exploring Singapore society and culture.

Throughout Levels One and Two, the seed narrative sought to address the following questions:

- a. What is the story to be told?
- b. How is the story to be told?
- c. What is the setting of the story?
- d. What is the experience? How will visitors be engaged?
- e. What is the key take-away for visitors?

Each of these questions had different implications on the form and function of the exhibit designs, particularly when the galleries are intended as experiential encounters with Singapore's history. Visitors are encouraged to explore and discover for themselves what has collectively helped to shape and define Singaporeans over the years. As no amount of gallery space can feasibly accommodate a comprehensive coverage of 700 years of Singapore's history, it is essential that key stories are told in the galleries through contextual settings and "visitor magnets" which form the mode of display, and visitor engagement and "take-aways" are shaped by sensory media (sight, smell and sound) as well as accessible captions and labels.

Connectivity and visitor experience

Singapore's rapid transformation from Third World to First over the past 50 years is a remarkable and well-documented achievement. The museum's narrative seeks to establish a platform of common experiences, memories and beliefs evolving from Singapore's historical development that can be shared among visitors. The presentation of these events and experiences also have to be sustainable in terms of maintaining their legacy for future

generations, particularly for those with no living memory of the past or who are indifferent to it.

With so many compelling stories to tell, the National Museum's curators have distilled the defining moments of each era of Singapore's post-independence history by selecting key artefacts to highlight certain milestones. More importantly, our curators worked together to identify common experiences that brought together Singapore's multi-racial, multi-religious society. The galleries provide an ideal platform to tell the story of Singapore's history in a way that will create a strong personal and emotional connection with both Singaporeans and foreign visitors.

Visitor experience is key to the narratives' ability to connect with their audiences. Traditionally, objects are placed in a showcase with an accompanying label that provides a description or explanation of how they were used. Rather than just having our visitors "look into" the showcases and observe the physical qualities of an object from an earlier time period, the National Museum recognises the need to do more to engage our audience in a meaningful way. Unlike the early period since the museum building first opened in 1887, today we have to compete for the attention of visitors with many other attractions from retail malls to the integrated resorts. It is thus especially important for us to create a unique experience for visitors and to change the perception that the museum is solely for niche audiences or high society.

The process of enhancing the visitor experience began, quite literally, from the start. Previously, visitors began their journey to the galleries at Level Two and descended to Level One via an external ramp, before continuing to the Singapore History Gallery (SHG). As part of the revamp, the new entrance to the SHG offers direct access to the exhibition, where visitors are greeted by a giant animated map of the Southeast Asia region, modelled after a 1570 map by Flemish cartographer Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598).

The overarching focus of the revamp was to adopt an immersive approach in bringing the artefacts to life. Our curators took various

factors into consideration, such as a richer selection of artefacts and engaging multimedia interactive displays, as well as ambient sounds and contextualised displays that provide a more realistic setting. Exhibition designers were consulted to create a “theatre set” in our galleries, where replicas and props were added to contextualise the objects in a physical space and evoke a certain time period in Singapore’s history. This allows our visitors to go beyond simply “observing” the objects to feeling that they have been transported back in time to another era, creating an emotional connection which in turn generates historical understanding.

Objects of significance

Regular visitors in Singapore’s museum scene will note that most of the objects in the National Museum belong to the folk-life category with little commercial value. However, these objects – many of which were contributed by ordinary Singaporeans – are often the ones that local visitors connect and resonate with emotionally. Among the new artefacts displayed in the galleries are personal implements and objects of national significance, as well as family heirlooms that hold a special significance to the people or institutions who donated or loaned them to the museum. These include a 1959 flexidisc recording of *Majulah Singapura* before it became the national anthem, a full set of the first National Service uniform, a Singapore National Registration Identification Card first issued in 1966, as well as a sewing machine used during the Second World War. In this aspect, our curators can be seen as “directors on theatre sets” who facilitate a contextual display that allows a seemingly ordinary artefact such as an A&W glass to become a powerful symbol of Singapore’s economic status and lifestyle in the 1970s.

This humble A&W glass – a piece of memorabilia from the first fast food restaurant that opened in Singapore – can be found in the “Building a Home” section of the Singapore History Gallery. The section takes a closer look at the experiences of Singaporeans in the 1970s as they moved into Housing Development Board (HDB) flats¹ from *kampongs* (villages) and overcrowded shophouses² in the city-centre.

The A&W glass is situated in a space inspired by the design of a typical HDB kitchen at the time. Alongside it are other kitchen and household appliances such as a rice cooker and mixer. These were regarded as prized possessions of Singaporean families as they were often the first appliances they owned, purchased only when they could afford it.

Unlike a Peranakan *kerosang* brooch, for example, there may be hardly any commercial value attached to the A&W glass or noted physical qualities about it. However, the museum functions as a powerful transformer that resituates former objects of domestic utility in a carefully arranged heritage context, allowing the A&W glass to acquire new meaning as a way to connect the public to a certain era in Singapore’s history. The value of the A&W glass is thus embodied in experiences and associations external to the object.

Entering “theatre set”

The HDB kitchen setting was very popular among participants on preview tours of the gallery, who were observed to have spent a longer time in this section examining the displayed household appliances in detail. One visitor used the term “nostalgia overload” to describe his experience, while other common responses in the feedback forms included “we used to have this at home” and “my mom is still using this”. While our curator did not intentionally seek to replicate a HDB flat in the 1970s, she has successfully created a space that generates an effective engagement with the past, particularly for local visitors.

Taking reference from images found in the *Our Home* magazines published by HDB from the 1970s till mid-1980s, our curator worked with the designers to choose a colour palette that was reminiscent of that era, including minute details such as the design motifs of the graphic floor tiles. Returning to the “theatre set” analogy, our visitors become “actors” who are free to move around in the space, to the extent of sitting on a sofa set that would be commonly found in HDB flats of that time. The inclusion of such props allows visitors to go beyond the limitations of physical showcases and “step back” in time,

as well as provides opportunities for them to interact with and take photos within the setting. While the gallery is a space that exists in the present, the HDB setting expresses an affective sense of the past reality, which allows visitors to generate historical understanding and meaning.

The above case study is an example of the National Museum's response to current trends and our efforts to remain relevant to our visitors in today's global era. While the traditionalist approach of displaying artefacts will always be at the forefront of curating, it is equally important for the museum to engage with visitors rather than simply presenting an expansive showcase of the past. As part of the revamp, we also explored other immersive display techniques to bring to life the stories and significance behind the artefacts. Visitors can relive the day when Singapore's independence was declared, be greeted by the aroma of afternoon tea on entering an old colonial bungalow, watch a new film in a drive-in cinema from the 1980s, and experience a sense of what life was like during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942 – 1945). These are just some of the interactive experiences visitors will discover in the new galleries, which use exhibition design, scents, multimedia and technology to contextualise artefacts and evoke moments or the atmosphere of an era.

Digital enhancements for a social experience

One of our key strategies for the revamp was to reconsider the use of multimedia and technology in the galleries. Previously, visitors to the Singapore History Gallery were guided by an audio companion device, which featured eight hours of multimedia content ranging from archival video footage and audio clips, to narrated stories and interviews with curators, historians and regular Singaporeans. While functioning as an “electric docent”, the device presented a quandary for the museum as the visitor experience became very much a solitary one. While this was acceptable and even preferred back when visiting the museum was thought to be a scholarly and academic activity, today's visitors are more vocal and demanding.

Beyond visiting an exhibition for educational purposes, visitors are often also seeking opportunities for social bonding, and view the museum as a leisure destination where they can be entertained.

In order to remain relevant and reach out to a broader audience, museums need to be able to connect not just cognitively with a select audience, but allow multiple connections to be made at different levels. They must also be outward-looking, engage with society and attract a broader audience base. The museum-going experience has changed from a personal one to a social activity, and the National Museum seeks to bring our visitors through a range of emotions, from moments of quiet self-reflection to fruitful exchanges of stories and memories.

The use of technology in the galleries was thus a careful consideration, in that technology and digital enhancements should serve the purpose of adding layers, texture and content, but not to define and overwhelm the experience. Our curators worked together to ensure that the technological options cater to a range of visitors from tech-savvy millennials (those born from the late 1980s to the early 2000s) to 80-year-old veterans, as well as allow visitors to determine the extent of additional information they wish to access. The introduction of digital “timeline kiosks”, for example, provides additional content at strategic points throughout the gallery, allowing visitors to connect historical events to what they are experiencing in the galleries, without information overload.

Our curators also worked with the Singapore Memory Project³ (an initiative of the National Library Board) to incorporate personal memories captured in video and audio at various multimedia kiosks within the galleries. Here, technology and digital media are used to lead visitors from the larger narrative of Singapore's history to a more personal and relatable exchange. This approach encourages visitors to internalise the stories that they hear and read about, and promotes the exchange of stories and encourages in our visitors a curiosity to delve into their own personal and family experiences. Visitors are also invited to submit their own stories or share their knowledge of Singapore's

international connections on an interactive map in the Singapore History Gallery's Global City section for other visitors to enjoy. By leveraging on digital media, we hope to stimulate discussions and encourage visitors to continue the museum experience even after they have left the building.

Another highlight for visitors is the commissioned multimedia art installation *GoHead/GoStan: Panorama Singapore* by Singaporean artists Brandon Tay and Safuan Johari, which takes visitors on an audio-visual expedition of the various periods in Singapore's history. This is the first time that the museum has commissioned and included an art installation within the gallery's narrative. *GoHead/GoStan* (the colloquial terms for "Go ahead" and "Go astern") unveils a non-chronological tapestry of familiar images derived from the nation's historical, geographical and social memories

that explore the Singaporean consciousness, articulated through its changing landscape of the past and present. This artwork concludes the Singapore History Gallery experience and invites visitors to ponder Singapore's evolving identity and history over the years to its present SG50 milestone.

Conclusion

The National Museum's revamp in the Golden Jubilee Year opens a path towards an understanding of the relevance of museums dealing with national history in the contemporary global world. At the heart of the revamp is a greater focus on creating personal and emotional connections with our visitors, to excite them to discover more about Singapore's history and heritage, and hopefully to inspire them to seek their own ways and means of contributing to the Singapore story over the next 50 years.

Notes

1. The Housing and Development Board was established in 1960 to tackle a lack of affordable housing and poor living conditions in *kampongs*, by constructing simple and standard flats for low-income families.
2. A shop that opens out onto the pavement, often also used as the owner's residence.
3. The Singapore Memory Project is a nation-wide movement that aims to capture and document moments and memories related to Singapore from individual Singaporeans, organisations, associations, companies and groups.



Singapore History Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



(Left) “Building A Home” section of the Singapore History Gallery
(Right) Multimedia art installation *GoHead/GoStan: Panorama Singapore* in the Singapore History Gallery
Images courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Interactive map in the “Global City” section of the Singapore History Gallery
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Voices of Singapore Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Modern Colony Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Growing Up Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Surviving Syonan Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

