BEING IN THE right place at the right time is an important ingredient in the success of any venture. Serendipity has certainly played an important part in how I came to a museum career. Singapore at the beginning of the 1990s was on the threshold of a period of unprecedented expansion in arts infrastructure. At around that time, I was looking for a change in my working life. In 1991 an exhibition on ceramics of the Han dynasty (206 BC—AD 220) was organised at the National Museum by the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society, which I happened to be president of at the time. This brought me into contact with the management of the museum. I was “talent-spotted”, and in January 1992 I found myself senior curator of the future Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). Two years later I became deputy director, and soon after that, director.

What we were tasked to do was a huge opportunity but one that also seemed dauntingly ambitious—to create a new national museum practically from scratch. This museum was to focus on the Asian civilisations that are part of Singapore’s wider cultural history. The worldwide museum building boom of the past twenty-five years has meant that many museum directors have opened new wings or new buildings during their tenure. But this project required us to simultaneously build the collection as well as develop the buildings to house them.

By the time I joined the museum, funds to convert and extend a small, turn of the century ex-school building (1) into our first home had been secured. It had also been decided that the historic Southeast Asian ethnographic collection of the old Raffles Museum was to be devolved to the ACM, and an acquisition budget was promised. But we had little else, not even a proper office (2). The ambition and scope of our brief far exceeded the space and collection available to us at that time.

Five short years later, in 1997, we opened the first ACM in our Armenian St building. Thanks to loans of Chinese material from many private collectors from around the globe, the exhibits were of a high standard, as was the manner in which they were displayed. It is not an exagger-
The opening of the second ACM at Empress Place, March 1st, 2003
A view of the Kwek Hong Png China gallery

A view of the South Asia gallery

The Kwek Hong Png China Gallery, opened in 2008, was another ambitious project that required significant structural changes and the creation of a new design for the galleries and circulation within the building. Unlike the second South Asia gallery, which opened in 2005, the Kwek Hong Png China Gallery required a complete redesign of the space to accommodate the Chinese collection. The opening of the gallery was met with critical acclaim, and it has since become one of the most popular galleries at ACM.

Building a museum is a complex process, involving the integration of new collections, research, and public engagement. The opening of new galleries, such as the Kwek Hong Png China Gallery, has provided ACM with a new platform to showcase its collections and engage with the public. The success of these galleries has been attributed to the careful planning and execution of the projects, as well as the dedication of the museum staff.

The Peranakan Museum, which opened in 2008, was another significant project for ACM. The museum was designed to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the Peranakan people, who are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who settled in Southeast Asia. The museum was a collaborative effort between ACM and the National Museum of Singapore, and it has become a popular destination for visitors from around the world.

The success of these projects has been attributed to the dedication of the museum staff, the support of the local community, and the commitment of the ACM board. The museum’s ability to attract visitors from around the world has also been aided by the development of new galleries and the integration of new collections.

In conclusion, the opening of new galleries and the development of new collections have been important milestones for ACM. These projects have not only expanded the museum’s collection but have also provided new opportunities for public engagement and educational programs. The success of these projects has been attributed to the dedication of the museum staff, the support of the local community, and the commitment of the ACM board.

1 A more detailed account of the first ten years of the ACM can be found in the “Introduction” to the special issue which Arts of Asia produced in November–December 2002 to mark the opening of the second ACM.

2 “Peranakan” — a Malay word meaning “locally born” — is a term used to describe the eclectic cultures of Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian communities long settled in Southeast Asia, which had assimilated aspects of mainstream Malay culture.
8 Queues outside the Peranakan Museum during the first weekend after its opening, April 2008

9 A view of one of the Wedding galleries, Peranakan Museum

10 A view of the beadwork display, Peranakan Museum
tional Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, the Yuan Shaoliang collection, and up till recently, the Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait. These loans have added breadth as well as depth to our gallery displays.

Although funding for our operations has occasionally posed some challenges, we have been lucky with funds for acquisitions. Start-up acquisition budgets were given to build collections for the ACM, as well as for the Peranakan Museum. While the sums were quite modest, the first tranches (for the ACM) came around the mid-1990s, a time when it was still possible to acquire high quality material for what now seems very reasonable prices. We bought quite rapidly but also very carefully and have been able to build up from scratch an Indian and an Islamic collection, as well as enhance our existing Southeast Asian collection and begin to plug the many gaps in our Chinese collection. In recent years, we have placed more emphasis on acquiring material that illustrates the interaction between different regions of Asia, and have also started collecting contemporary pieces. For the Peranakan Museum, we have been in a position to acquire important individual objects (11), as well as entire collections.

Donors and benefactors have played a crucial role in the growth of our collections. The donation of the Frank and Pamela Hickley collection of blanc de Chine in 2000 was a momentous event for the ACM. Not only was the Hickley collection formed in Singapore, it was the best blanc de Chine collection in private hands, and also came from a part of China (Fujian province) which is the ancestral homeland of the majority of Chinese Singaporeans. This collection was in all respects a perfect fit for ACM. Prior to the donation being made, we organised an expedition to Dehua for Pamela Hickley (12) and then exhibited the collection, incorporating information and materials that we had gathered in Fujian.

Other triumphs for ACM have been the donation of the Edmond Chin collection of Southeast Asian gold (13), the Tan Tsze Chor family collection of Chinese paintings (14), and the Andy Ng collection of Southeast Asian textiles and gold. Currently, we are working with the Kwek family through their foundation, the Hong Leong Foundation, to build up certain areas of our Chinese collection (15).

We continue to receive funds from generous individuals that have enabled us to add rare and important pieces to the collection. Some of our donors have been with us from the beginning, a tremendous leap of faith on their part in the days when we did not even have premises. One of our first major acquisitions of Indian material—a Chola bronze—was funded by two of our earliest supporters (16). I can well remember the jubilation when we successfully bid on the telephone for this piece.

Recent major sponsored acquisitions have included a Chola bronze figure of Uma (17), a Cham bronze figure of Lokeshvara (18), a Dehua Guanyin group (19), a Chinese jade boulder (20), a Vietnamese ceramic figure probably made for the Indonesian market (21), and a procession al makara from the northeast coast of Malaysia (22). Other recent acquisitions are described in the articles in this issue of *Arts of Asia*.

The requests for loans that we have been receiving from overseas museums in recent years are a sign of the growing reputation of our collection (see Bibliography for list...
Dr Tan Tsze Chor at home, around 1980. The two Xu Beihong paintings behind him were among his favourite possessions. Both works were included in the collection donated by the Tan family to ACM in 2000–2002.

Viewing possible acquisitions with Mrs Cecilia Kwek, 2009.

Figure of Sambandar
Bronze, late Chola, 13th century
Height 47 cm
1993-00019
Purchased with funds from Singapore Reinsurance Corporation Ltd and India International Insurance Pte Ltd

Figure of Uma Parameshwari
Bronze, Chola, 11th century
Height 65.4 cm
2007-01051
Sponsored in part by Mr Hwang Soo Jin, Mini Environment Service Pte Ltd, Telekonsult Singapore Pte Ltd, Vemala Rajamanickam, The Singapore Buddhist Lodge and other donors through the President’s South Asia Acquisition Fund.
18
Figure of Lokeshvara
Gold and silver over clay core
Champa, circa 9th century
Height 61 cm
2008-06660
Gift of Joe Grimberg and Rosalind Shellim in memory of Aaron Brooke David

19
Kneeling figure with offering vessel
Stoneware, northern Vietnam, Le dynasty, 15th century
Possibly Cu Lao Cham, Quang Nam province
Height 22.7 cm
2004-00904
Gift of Joe Grimberg and Rosalind Shellim in memory of Aaron Brooke David

20
Jade boulder
China, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1795)
Height 14.8 cm
2008-00325
Purchased with funds from
Mr and Mrs Denis Low, Pin International Properties Ltd,
Alan Chan Hong Joo, John Ruffin Knight, Jackson Tai,
Tridex Pte Ltd, Dick Oene Verbeek Van der Sande,
CIMB Bank Berhad, Eurokars Centre, Joseph Grimberg,
Hong Seh Motors Pte Ltd, Vernon Khoo, Lee Foundation,
Ong Kian Min, Ong Kok Thai, Judith Prakash, Rajah and Tann,
Tan Koh Young, Wilmar Trading Pte Ltd and other donors through the China Acquisitions Fund

18
Guanyin in a heavenly grotto
Porcelain, Dehua, Fujian province, China, probably 17th century
Height 32.5 cm
2007.52980
Purchased with funds from the Shaw Foundation, through ACM Gala 2007
Makara processional vehicle ornament
Wood, metal sheet, wire, pigments and varnish, northeastern Malay Peninsula
Possibly 18th century with later additions
Height 204 cm
2004-00906
Purchased from funds from Friends of ACM through Gala Dinner 2003

A view of the "Land of the Ottoman Sultans" exhibition

of publications on our collection. We have also started to export exhibitions and will be sending a show on the Peranakans to the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and other European venues this autumn. This is a happy situation we would not have imagined possible ten years ago.

Over the past eighteen years the ACM has presented over sixty exhibitions. We have sought to strike a balance between the blockbuster with wide appeal, and smaller, narrower focus, more in-depth exhibitions. Occasionally we have been part of multi-venue international touring exhibitions. These itineraries have brought us the Rockefeller collection of Asian art from the Asia Society, New York (1993), Egyptian mummies from the British Museum (1999), Chinese paintings from the Shanghai Museum (2004), and most recently, the Buddhist sculptures from Qingzhou, Shandong (2009).

Mostly, however, we have initiated our own exhibitions, preferring the challenge of negotiating directly with lenders, and the flexibility to tailor a show specifically for our audience. It is these exhibitions that I feel are among our best achievements.

While some of our smaller scale exhibitions were fully funded internally, in most cases we have worked with sponsors to help realise an exhibition project. The dream of most museum directors is the sponsor who agrees to be lead supporter of not one but a series of museum programmes and exhibitions. J.P. Morgan and the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple Trust have been those dream sponsors for us.

There are so many exhibitions that I am proud we have done. Whether they were commercial successes or not, all have pushed the boundaries in some way and been well received critically. These include our millennium exhibition "The Dating Game: Calendars & Time in Asia" (1999), "From the Land of the Ottoman Sultans" (2004) (23), an exploration of "Beauty in Asia" (2008), and a pioneering exhibition on the dissemination of Buddhist art styles, "On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia" (2008) (24).

Apart from gaining a reputation for the way in which we curate our exhibitions, over the years we have also gained a reputation at ACM for good design. From a purely personal perspective, four exhibitions stand out, because their complexity and scale required my close involvement from the earliest stages of preparation.

"Alamakara: 5000 Years of India" (1994) was the first exhibition on India to be held in Southeast Asia. This was a true blockbuster with a glittering array of well over three hundred exhibits from the subcontinent displayed in a sprawling suite of rooms in the old National Museum.3

The experience of selecting artefacts from the store rooms of the National Museum, New Delhi in the company of our curator Dr Gauri Krishnan was a memorable one. Architect Mok Wei Wei did a beautiful job of the exhibition design, with richly tinted walls, settings for sculpture inspired by temple architecture (25), and evocative music. The exhibition was a huge popular success, attracting 165,000 visitors, the largest number to a museum exhibition in Singapore up to that time.

Exhibitions can take several years to come to fruition. Our project with the Vatican Museums took an unusually long seven years, almost an eternity by the standards of museum exhibitions although clearly not by the standards
of Rome. But our perseverance paid off. Not only did “Journey of Faith: Art and History from the Vatican Collections” (2005) have spectacular objects, it bore the stamp of the storyline that we ourselves had developed, including a section on Christianity in Asia (26). The exhibition was sensitively designed by Sebastian Chun—respectful and sympathetic to old master paintings, religious icons and the like, but with a contemporary edge. We put a lot of personal effort into marketing this exhibition, and it turned out to be another one of our big popular successes, drawing about as many visitors as Alamkara on a daily average. For the last weekend of the exhibition we were continuously open for thirty-six hours—the first time any museum in Singapore had an all-night opening—and attracted a huge crowd (27).

For many years we had wanted to organise an exhibition from Vietnam but until recently, lack of regulations on the export of antiquities from that country had made such a project impossible. Exhibition curator Heidi Tan and I visited archaeological and heritage sites in order to get a sense of the country and its culture, and our Vietnamese colleagues cooperated by lending us some of their best artefacts, including several stone sculptures that were normally concreted into their display plinths. “Vietnam! From Myth to Modernity” (2008) had the distinction of being only the second comprehensive exhibition ever to be done on Vietnam, and was also the first time the Vietnamese government allowed the temporary export of loans from private collections (28).

After having worked with several Chinese museums over the years, we finally got to work with the Palace Museum in Beijing on “The Kangxi Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City” (2009). My first meeting with the executive vice-director of the Palace Museum was in fact not far off from being an imperial audience, taking place in the former private quarters against the backdrop of a wall of the “one hundred antiquities”.

Co-curators of the exhibition Tan Huism and Kan Shuyi and I worked intensively on developing the storyline. Exhibit selection was facilitated by the Palace Museum’s digitised collection catalogue. The process was a lot faster if not as pleasurable as it had been in New Delhi or Rome where we were able to see the real things. The exhibition design by Henry Yeo was bold and simple, free of clichés and with an appropriate sense of scale and grandeur (29). This exhibition has been our most popular to date, with over 194,000 visitors.

Our use of information technology (IT) in the galleries and in exhibitions has often been innovative, although it has not been free of the usual problems that plague IT applications in museums everywhere. We have learnt from our mistakes and are now producing more engaging and robust museum IT, as can be seen in recent applications at the Peranakan Museum and in last year’s Kangxi exhibition (30).

Each time we opened a new museum, we would all breathe a sigh of relief and think—“Good, now we will have time to consolidate”. This as it turned out, was only

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3 At that time, ACM staff were sharing the National Museum building with colleagues from the future Singapore Art and Singapore History Museums and we took turns to use different galleries for our special exhibitions.
The queue at midnight during the last weekend of the "Vatican" exhibition, October 8th–9th, 2005

Cham temple sculptures in a corner of the "Vietnam" exhibition
the triumph of optimism over experience—as each time, another museum development project has landed in our laps before we could fully recover from the experience of the previous one. And the pattern looks set to continue, with an extension to ACM and also to the Peranakan Museum on the cards.

At this rate of expansion, some things have inevitably suffered. There has been little time for any kind of research apart from what is needed for exhibitions, and the occasional publication. However, it seems almost pointless to speculate what might have happened had we had more time to build up the ACM. The first ACM was conceived in the high growth-rate environment of the early 1990s. While there were many unknowns that the more cautious might have baulked at, had we not jumped in and grasped the opportunity, perhaps nothing would have happened at all. Although we have led stressful professional lives as a result, I like to see our continuing access to funds from government as well as philanthropists as a vote of confidence in what we have achieved.

The rewards of a museum career are many. Some of my happiest moments have been in the midst of a sea of visitors at one of our more popular exhibitions. These moments have made all the hard work worthwhile. It has been a privilege to work with so many different people—dedicated colleagues, sometimes quirky but also generous benefactors, our loyal volunteers, and many other supporters and well-wishers. As I leave the scene, I am happy to see that many staff members have grown with the institution; they have grown in professional confidence and stature and will carry on the good work. Best of all is the knowledge that the ACM has built a reputation for quality, and that this is something our public and our peers have come to expect of us.

Indeed, high standards have always been the mantra at ACM. Acquisition proposals are vigorously debated before they get to committee. Our collection may be young but we try to interpret and present it as well as it would be in the best museums anywhere in the world. There is always the attempt to emulate and benchmark. At the ACM, exhibit selection, exhibition design and text writing are all activities that undergo an often agonising number of changes and refinements before they are fixed.

In common with many museums, we have tried to engage a wider audience. We send mini-exhibitions to the libraries, we have open house days, and Halloween dress-ups. But we have never tried too hard to be hip or cool. I have always believed that quality never goes out of fashion, and that work done with conviction and done very well is the ultimate in cool.

Bibliography


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For information on ACM exhibition catalogues refer to www.acm.org.sg.