

MAN DOES NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE.



Over the past centuries, men of means have recognised and championed the need to feed the mind and nurture a spirit of enquiry and lifelong education. Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), a physician, provided the collections that launched the British Museum in 1753. Seventy-three years later, James Smithsonian willed his estate towards the founding of an institution that continues to strive for the "increase and diffusion of knowledge among men" through 19 Smithsonian museums across America.

History is a narrative in perpetual progress. The work to preserve our material heritage and promote a living connection with the past is a joint endeavour between the public sector, private groups and the people who are both the makers and consumers of history. This partnership is acknowledged in recent initiatives such as "Private Giving for the Public Good", a campaign launched this April by British Museums to encourage a culture of giving through tangible incentives for donors and greater recognition for those involved in cultural philanthropy.

Though a mere little red drop compared to the billions given in America, the UK and Australia, individuals and organisations have contributed invaluable funds and resources to Singapore's heritage sector. In the past five years, National Heritage Board (NHB) museums have received cash, artefact and in-kind donations amounting to more than S\$52 million, with cash alone totalling nearly S\$13 million. Individuals and corporations that make cash and artefact contributions to the NHB are eligible for double tax deduction.

Financial incentives aside, cultural philanthropy in Singapore assumes a broad range of guises, as shown in the annual Patron of Heritage (POH) Awards. Topping the list this year were luminaries such as the Lee Foundation and the Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation with the latter named the Distinguished Patron of Heritage for their pledge of S\$2.25 million to the Singapore Art Museum's APB Foundation Signature Art Prize for outstanding contemporary Southeast Asian art. Other awardees include individuals who shed new light on national history by donating personal family records and mementos. The National Archives of Singapore was honoured to receive from the family of Elizabeth Choy the late war heroine's letters about her wartime struggles. Another priceless gift came from the family of the late Mr Tham Sien Yen, in the form of documents that chronicle Mr Tham's exploits as a resistance fighter in the anti-Japanese group, Force 136.

The family of distinguished artists such as Chee Kiang Siong and Anthony Poon donated artworks that helped augment NHB's collection of Singapore art. Meanwhile, philanthropists such as barrister Joseph Grimberg combine their areas of personal interest with public largesse. A keen collector of Vietnamese artefacts, Mr Grimberg contributed rare items to the Asian Civilisations Museum that visitors are able to view at the ongoing Vietnam exhibition. These include an unusual 15th century blue-and-white porcelain of a kneeling clown-servant and a blue and white dish with sinuous dragons and flaming pearls from the same period.



A MISSION TO EDUCATE

Beyond the numbers on cheques and catalogues, this year's POH line-up also reveals much creative dynamism and lateral thinking within Singapore's cultural philanthropy scene. Take the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation (TCTF), set up in 1976 by the then-chairman of OCBC Bank. Not content to simply sponsor exhibitions, the foundation makes it a point to find synergies between the various groups it supports in order to mutually enrich the experiences of its beneficiaries.

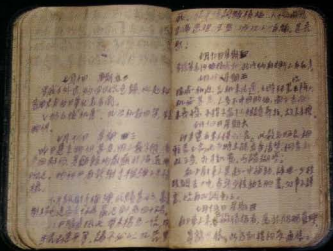
According to TCTF's Programme Director Ms Yap Su-Yin, the late Tan Sri (Dr) Tan Chin Tuan and his family "have always been very enthusiastic about giving back to the community." TCTF serves a whole gamut of interests, from the elderly and disabled to youth and education. Though the arts and heritage are not core causes, Ms Yap acknowledges that they have "a very important role to play in terms of education for both the young and old."

Thus, TCTF has wholeheartedly supported the recent Greek Masterpieces from the *Louvre* exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore. "We see our approach and role as catalytic," explains Ms Yap. "We want to pull partners together so that we can deepen the social good that we are doing and achieve multiplier effects."

TCTF sees events like the *Louvre* exhibition as an opportunity for creative education and heritage awareness. "We are talking about cultivating the mind, heart and spirit," says Ms Yap. Besides a cash gift of S\$150,000, TCTF worked to extend the reach of the exhibition to ordinary Singaporeans. Between January and March this year, some 3,000 beneficiaries, volunteers and staff from non-profit bodies such as the Canossaville Children's Home and Kheng Chiu Loke Tin Kee Home had the chance to see the exquisite sculptures. The children and elderly residents went to the museum on buses chartered by TCTF, which also arranged guided tours by costumed narrators and topped off the excursions with goodie-bags and refreshments.

Such events usher in a whole new audience for the galleries, while TCTF gets to "expand the educational opportunities for children or groups who'd never have a chance to go to a museum at all." On her part, Ms Yap drew further links together by roping in students from the Nanyang Academy of Fine

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Arts (NAFA), which TCTF supports via scholarships. The students fleshed out characters in ancient Greece from famous Greek lore inside the exhibition space in a performance called *If Statues Could Talk*. Creating a rare opportunity for NAFAs Fine Arts students to showcase their talents, TCTF invited the students to exhibit their sketched and photographed impressions at the Museum during the foundation's Valentine's Day gathering, where TCTF had invited more than 250 senior staff from over 140 of the many organisations it supports.

"I (We) wanted it to be a celebration of *Louvre*, or 'Love' so to speak," says Ms Yap, punning on the French word *Louvre* which sounds like "Love" in English. "These are people who spend their whole life helping others." Besides viewing the exhibition and artwork, the guests were introduced to TCTF's partners, including the National Museum and NAFA. Ms Yap expresses her hope that through these networking sessions, the groups would find new and fruitful ways of working with one another.

The Foundation's funding philosophy seeks out causes that lead to sustained social returns. On the foundation's philosophy of giving, Ms Yap shares: "We want to see longevity that comes from a robust relationship among the donor, beneficiary and partners," explains Ms Yap. But apart from dollars and sense, compassion and an enlightened outlook are vital factors in the equation, she stresses. "Many things in life cannot be quantified. Neither can their outcome be measured quickly nor simply," she says of TCTF's efforts to promote learning and creative education by involving its beneficiaries in cultural activities. "By opening their minds to

a broader world, we wish to encourage them to keep learning. Hopefully, the exposure and opportunities we are creating for them will raise their awareness and appreciation for the arts in time."

This thinking is put into further practice in the ongoing European Cultural Season (ECS), of which TCTF is a founding partner. At the launch of the *Mozart - A Child Prodigy* interactive exhibition, which comes under the ECS, at the National Museum, Ms Yap spearheaded a Labour Day treat for sixty children from two homes. "They left that exhibition realising how people lived, dressed and travelled 200 years ago. At the end, they were able to hum at least one Mozart tune," she recounts. As the ECS progresses with performances and exhibitions from July till December 2008, she hopes there will be more opportunities to hold museum outings for beneficiaries that would be meaningful and unforgettable.

A HERO'S WAR JOURNAL

For some, forgetting is an impossible task, particularly when private lives are intertwined with the collective memories of a nation-in-waiting. When Tham Sien Yen died in late 2007, it was the passing of a man who fought alongside Lim Bo Seng as a Lieutenant in the Force 136, a special operations unit that resisted the Japanese in Malaya during the Second World War. Recruited by Lim himself, Tham received guerrilla training in India before landing in Malaya to conduct intelligence and sabotage activities against the Japanese.

While packing his belongings, Tham's daughter Yee Yen found her father's journal and other artefacts



GIVERS & MAKERS

Dominic Khoo is also a keen watch collector who values the craftsmanship of old mechanical timepieces. He observes that such artisanal skills and values are vanishing and bemoans the 'too fast too furious' pace of life that has taken their place. "We have moved ahead with modern processes so much that we have forgotten what it means to take our time and perfect something just for pride and pleasure," he remarks.

▶ "I think people need a passion for the past!"

such as a Japanese sword he received from the British after the war, oral and video recordings, photographs and maps. Of particular interest to war historians is a report on how some Force 136 members were captured by the Japanese in 1944, Tham's accounts of life as a fighter in the Malayan jungles and personal correspondence with other former Force 136 officers.

Extracts from the journal reveal vivid episodes such as how the force battled enemy troops disguised as civilians. Tham's journal also relates how Force 136 received their supplies via airdrops and numerous skirmishes with Japanese troops. Accompanying the notes is a map of Perak state, which traces Tham's landing at Bagan Datoh via submarine in 1943 and his hazardous journey into the interior to reach the Force 136 base camp in Bukit Bidor.

Both the journal and Japanese sword are now on display at the Memories at Old Ford Factory in Bukit Timah. This exhibit was possible thanks to a generous decision by Yee Ven to donate and loan the materials to the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). For her gift, Yee Ven was named a Friend of Heritage at the POH Awards.

"These artefacts related to Force 136 belong to history and to this generation," said Yew Chin, Yee Ven's younger sister, in an interview with Chinese daily *Zaobao* on 15 April 2008. "Donating and loaning them would enable more people to learn more about this part of history." Although the sisters regard the belongings as priceless to the family, the family felt that the items would be in good hands under the care of NAS.

"These artefacts portrayed the passion and process of a youth protecting his country, and are very good national education resources," added Yew Chin in



the same Zaobao interview. "We believe NAS will preserve these artefacts and reflect history in its entirety." Yew Chin, who is a polytechnic lecturer and Chinese language writer, also plans to pen a book on her father and his life after the war, when he left the military to become a businessman.

CREATIVE PHILANTHROPY BY CULTURE BUFFS

Sharing the Tham sisters' conviction that the past must be preserved for the future, members of a younger generation are delving into cultural philanthropy by drawing upon their personal areas of interest and ability. Qi Yuwu, a Guangzhou-born actor now based in Singapore, is an avid collector of Chinese contemporary art who combines his passion with a public role at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Well-known for his starring role in the hit movie *881*, Qi has conducted Celebrity Tours at SAM, offering guided narratives of the Zeng Fanzhi exhibition, *Idealism*, in 2007 as well as this year's Feng Zhengjie showcase, *Primary Colours*.

"I see the works of Chinese contemporary artists being accepted and supported by everyone, including the Singapore Art Museum and the general public," stated Qi in a television interview on 23 February 2008. "It gives me an opportunity to share with them my views on China's contemporary artists. Through sharing, I also get to learn new things."

Another creative individual who has contributed to heritage causes is award-winning photographer Dominic Khoo. The National Heritage Board was one of six organisations to receive proceeds from a gala auction for a specially produced coffee table book entitled *Pure*, which features black-and-white photographers by Khoo of Singapore celebrities in the nude. This daring concept arose from Khoo's desire to show individuals wearing nothing but their raw emotions of joy or sorrow, mirroring in part his own feelings of grief at the sudden passing of his mother after an overseas trip.

"I am inspired daily by my late mother," he states. "And to honour her, I wish to continue doing good and helping those who need more than I do. The charities have been selected based on their consistent transparency in their management of their organisations." Khoo also credits his mother and family for sparking his pursuit of photography. "One of my grandfather's businesses was photography-related," he revealed. "He published a large-format

limited edition book based on the works of G.R. Lambert, the first photographer to set up shop in Singapore (in 1867). It featured plates of Malaya, so I guess you could say heritage was in my blood." In a curious parallel, only thirty copies of *Pure* were auctioned, which aimed to raise a total sum of at least S\$300,000 for Khoo's chosen beneficiaries. Besides capturing eternal moments in time, Khoo is also a keen watch collector who values the craftsmanship of old mechanical timepieces. He observes that such artisanal skills and values are vanishing and bemoans the 'too fast too furious' pace of life that has taken their place. "We have moved ahead with modern processes so much that we have forgotten what it means to take our time and perfect something just for pride and pleasure," he remarks. "I think people need a passion for the past!"

Khoo expresses hope that his contribution to NHB will go to fund programmes and stimulate more interest in heritage. Adding that more younger professionals and patrons could come forward to be more involved in activities such as giving guided tours, he issues a challenge, "Shouldn't we be engaged in an all-round education?"

Telling compelling stories, like the war movies and tales he loved as a child, would also help stir people to give time and money toward cultural philanthropy. "I think people would be more active if they could relate more to the past," Khoo opines. "I personally think it needs to be done because there are so many lessons that can be learnt from the past."

GIVING FOR THE FUTURE

Relating to the past is a constant endeavour for another well-known personality in Singapore's heritage scene. As a child, Mrs Julia Oh was enthralled by the stone age hut circles and medieval farmhouses of Dartmoor. "Just where I walked, history was all around us," she recounts of her home in rural Devon. When she moved to Singapore in the 1970s, Mrs Oh continued to cultivate the "sense of a very tangible connection to people who lived long ago". Here, she discovered "the richness of the cultures of Asia" and immersed herself in the local heritage scene via the Friends of the Museum (FOM). Starting out with a presentation on 19th century engravings of Singapore (which she had learnt were made by a distant relative), Mrs Oh became FOM President in 1987 and from 2002-2005, was Secretary-General of the World Federation of Friends of Museums (WFFM), which serves over



PHOTO: RUBY LOON

"I hope that over the following ten years we will have a group of 20 young museum personnel who have been able to follow their interests and make new contacts in the international scene," states Mrs Julia Oh, who envisions a new cohort of museum workers who would inject fresh ideas, motivation and networks into Singapore's heritage sector. "My grandchildren are here, and they love the museum. Their favourite place is to go around the Singapore Gallery... push the buttons on the audio guide to learn more about the artefacts in the showcases. But I want them to keep coming back to the museum and using it as a place that's relevant to them."

2 million Museum Friends worldwide.

Having overseen the work of museum professionals and heritage volunteers for nearly 25 years, Mrs Oh is convinced of the need for young museum staff to enhance their training and have opportunities to meet fellow workers in other parts of the world. "We need to look outside Singapore for examples and inspiration," she says. During her travels to WFFM meetings, she came across numerous instances of museums and volunteers who were engaging the communities around them with fresh approaches in programming and heritage involvement.

One initiative that especially impressed her was a programme by a young woman in Chile. "One of the many things she created was a memory book that was distributed to schoolchildren, and she asked them to create a whole series of memories which were particularly personal to them," Mrs Oh recalls. "They had to describe the house they lived in, their grandparents, what special treasure they'd put in a treasure box, and it opened their eyes to understanding much more about how history is created." In other places like Mexico, Museum Friends have brought homeless children who hung around museum premises into the building to see the artwork. "These were children who had never been in museums before and some of these guys actually went on to become trained artists," Mrs Oh remarked. In Toronto, she saw the children of immigrant families immersing themselves into their new homeland through programmes at the Children's Own Museum. Meanwhile, mothers with young babies were encouraged to gather at the National Museum in Canberra, turning the museum into a social space where a new generation grows up to feel at home.

Such observations sparked what Mrs Oh hopes will be a fruitful gift for Singapore's young museum professionals. Last September, she raised the idea of an international travel grant to NHB Chairman Professor Tommy Koh. Through CEO Michael Koh, NHB readily matched her offer of S\$10,000 a year for two deserving museum staff under 35, who could "choose to go anywhere in the world on attachment to museums for training or courses." Mrs Oh envisions a new cohort of museum workers who would inject fresh ideas, motivation and networks into Singapore's heritage sector, stating, "I hope that over the following ten years we will have a group of 20 young museum personnel who have

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Already, two candidates are pursuing their chosen fields abroad. Mun Seng, a Senior Conservation Officer with the Heritage Conservation Centre, is now working with a Senior Wood Conservator on a six-week attachment at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Describing Mun Seng as “very, very passionate about what he does, Mrs Oh adds that his new skills in conserving wooden artefacts will “be much in demand” for tasks such as preserving Peranakan furniture. The other recipient, Karen Chin, is Manager, Education Programmes at the Asian Civilisations Museum. “She jumped at the chance,” recalls Mrs Oh, “and has found a wonderful place at the Victoria & Albert Museum’s programming department”. There, Ms Chin is focusing on improving museum access for disabled and disadvantaged visitors.

For Mrs Oh, who received a Friend of Heritage award for launching the grant, cultural philanthropy is about giving in all its forms. “It’s not just about people giving money,” she muses, “it’s also about people giving time, giving interest, giving support and being an ambassador.” She cites communities in Australia and the US, where “many historical places are run entirely by volunteers – people who will not let an old building die.” Such instances of ‘Soft Philanthropy’, while harder to recognise compared to outright financial donations, include volunteer work to support museum activities, guiding at special exhibitions and programmes and giving talks. “It is often very low key,” Mrs Oh notes, “but Soft Philanthropy has its great rewards in terms of satisfaction, personal contacts, self-learning and community connection.”

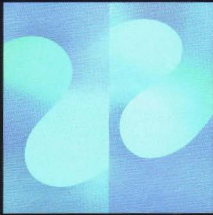
The chance to touch bits of Singapore’s history as it emerges from the ground are moments that Mrs Oh cherishes in her years with FOM. Through fellow FOM member and archaeologist, John Miksic, she was able to take part in digs at Fort Canning

Hill, brushing out evidence of a civilisation that existed in Singapore before the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. “Where else would you get that opportunity?” she exclaims. But whatever its form and expression, Mrs Oh hopes to see a vibrant future for the past in Singapore, with museums becoming forums where people gather and individuals and groups all contribute in their own capacities to enliven and enrich the heritage scene. People need different experiences – take the museum out into the community,” she urges. “I can see it beginning to happen here, and the National Museum is probably the best example.”

Ms Yap from the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation shares this view. “NHB is already doing a lot in terms of their programming and pushing the boundaries,” she states. “That direction is the way to go – why can’t we reach that stage where when the weekend comes, the first thing I think about is ‘Who knows what’s going to come up today at the museum; it must be something exciting!’”

“We remember our past, we enjoy our present, but we must also remember to leave a legacy for the future,” adds Ms Yap, “That’s what the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation is doing.” Closing on her personal vision, Mrs Oh expresses her hope that Singapore museums would become more plugged into the international scene and invest more in training to become a centre for museum skills in Asia.

“I see no separation between the past and the future in Singapore – my present has become my grandchildren’s past; it’s a continuum,” Mrs Oh ends on a philosophical note. “My grandchildren live here, and they love the museums. Their favourite place is to go around the Singapore Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore and push the buttons on the audio guide to learn more about the artefacts in the showcases. But I want them to keep coming back to the museum and using it as a place that’s relevant to them.”



Singapore's heritage and cultural sector owe much to the likes of the people who have been featured in this article. There are many more others whom we could not highlight or thank in this article. To all the great hearts and minds who keep our heritage alive and kicking, BeMUSE says a big, "THANK YOU!" Please do keep your generosity flowing and keep our living traditions and heritage buzzing.