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8. Interest, Commitment and Enthusiasm

Friends of the National Museum Singapore

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The ACM Cat

In memory of the cat that adopted this building
and became the museum's mascot, 1998-1999

"To be entrusted with the mission of guiding tourists, casual visitors and, most importantly, Singapore students around the Singapore Art Museum buildings and the artworks that are displayed has been a privilege which at the same time carries a heavy responsibility. This mandate has kept me focused during my years of guiding at SAM and given me such a wonderful opportunity for investigating, studying, researching, learning and hopefully imparting the knowledge I have gained through this process."

- Maureen Hellspong, SAM docent for eight years



Interest, *Commitment* and Enthusiasm



a particular exhibition is trying to portray. More than this, however, they are an invaluable part of the museum experience.

The docents' eagerness to refresh, expand on and share their knowledge has contributed to the growing visitor interest in Singapore's museums - students, the local community and the numerous tourists. As the museums have extended their scope and reinforced their presence in the community so has our docent group expanded to meet their needs, from just eleven volunteer guides in 1979 to one hundred and fifteen newly-trained docents for the Singapore Art Museum and Asian Civilisations Museum in 2002 being added to our existing ranks of experienced docents.

The start of a new docent training course is always fresh and exciting both for the eager participants and for those who are there to share their experiences and knowledge. For everyone who wants to be immersed in the community, who has a thirst for more knowledge of the region's history, culture and the arts, who enjoys meeting people and helping them to appreciate Singapore and beyond, the Friends of the National Museum's docent programme is a must-do.

An effective docent has always been much more than just a good museum guide. Assuredly our docents do draw visitors' attention to some representative objects and give a very clear understanding of what

The requirements for a docent in 2003 have been aptly summed up as ICE: Interest, Commitment and Enthusiasm. These traits are not so very far removed from Merle Quie's advertisement in the January 1979 newsletter for people seeking a "continuing challenge and opportunity for community service and for sharing one's sense of discovery"! Merle went on to say that recruits would "help each other to refresh and increase their knowledge, working together in constant exchanges of experience. This is all done in a spirit of friendliness and helpfulness. We do not consider ourselves 'pros' but are learning all the time."



1984

- Volunteers design and create first 'Study kits' to be distributed to local schools
- FOM participates in National Museum special project, *Pageant of Asian Costumes*
- Article in newsletter states "Membership is now fully computerised!"
- Volunteers catalogue National Museum's collections of Buddhas, laquerware, ceramics and furniture (two-year project)
- Friday morning lecture series introduced in addition to Wednesday mornings: three per week
- FOM sponsors art exhibition, *A New Generation of Singapore Artists*
- Membership: **550**
- Library relocates to home of member

DOCENTS OF YESTERYEAR

From the very start FOM members have been expected to volunteer their time in the service of the museum. In November 1978 a committee of ten, headed by Merle Quie, began researching different items in the museum collection as the beginning of a docent programme. Even at this early stage the group gave informal tours, for example to a group of schoolchildren and mothers at the request of the American Embassy.



Each volunteer studied a different subject and within three months had completed the research and condensed it into 'two to three minutes' talks' which were combined to form a one-hour tour. The new museum volunteers then held ten training sessions with handouts on basic background knowledge of the museum and its contents for potential guides. Afterwards the guides met once a week to discuss exhibits, their tours and to continue to build their knowledge.

One of the pioneer docents (and current FOM advisor), Pheng Tan, recalls: "We were mostly a non-local group and we worked closely with the curators in setting up some exhibits such as one on Peranakans. Trainees often had a special interest in museums, the arts or crafts and this drew them in. Some also had previous experience of guiding in museums in the region. All our actual training was done in the museum so we could see the exhibits as we discussed them. We would be presented with a sheath of notes to learn rather than preparing our own talk."

Once organised, the newly-minted docents took other FOM members on the first museum tour on the fourteenth of March 1979.

In October 1980, Merle Quie, then the first docent group coordinator on the Steering committee, announced in the newsletter that the docents were ready to offer guided tours in English in the National Museum every Tuesday from eleven in the morning to twelve noon. Each tour was limited to ten people and open to all.

This first docent group of eleven met every Tuesday for further training and practice sessions and their weekly guided tours were said to be "well received and increasingly popular", leading to a renewed request for more guides as it is our "eventual aim to offer daily tours plus meet every request for special tours."

In September 1981, the docents developed a new six-month training programme to allow participants ample opportunity to familiarise themselves with the museum exhibits - the first of our well organised and comprehensive training programmes. Group discussions and written question and answer sessions formed part of a weekly training seminar and extra time on research at the museum was expected.

During that year we increased our tours to twice a week and continued through the holiday months of June, July and August and by November were offering daily guided tours, except for weekends and public holidays - no small feat with scarcely a dozen guides. Fortunately in March 1982, fourteen docents completed the first formal training programme. The following year sixteen docents graduated and we have never looked back.



1985

National Museum officially reopens following renovation work

- Volunteers participate in research project for *Architectural Heritage* exhibition
- Lectures every Friday morning repeated back-to-back
- Regular docent tours increase: Tuesday - Friday mornings plus Tuesday and Saturday afternoons

- Friends of the National Museum, Singapore welcomed into the World Federation of Friends of Museums
- Membership: **600**
- Vertical files (cuttings, etc.) introduced into library

