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10. A Small World of Discovery

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"The museums have been one of the best ways to help us grow culturally. Catch the children at an early age; make sure their first museum experience is enjoyable and full of fun and they will come back again, as adults and as parents with their children. Make our history and exhibitions come alive and visitors, young and old, will keep coming back!"

- Genevieve Peng, Assistant Director-Children's Discovery Gallery, Singapore History Museum

A small World of Discovery

The rows of tiny shoes neatly placed on the shoe racks indicate that another group of young students are discovering all types of secrets within the Children's Discovery Gallery located in the Singapore History Museum. A short time earlier these same five to nine year-old girls and boys, dressed smartly in their school uniforms, would have walked two-by-two into this strange new world - full of anticipation, yet shy and coy. A quick glance through the doorway tells how their timid looks have been transformed into open expressions of delight and discovery; the noise makes one wonder if these children could ever have been nervous - they are in an environment created to transport them into another world for two hours.



room! One can only imagine how hot, stuffy and cramped it must have been ... but the teachers loved it. The schools recognised the benefits of the students visiting the museum and gaining knowledge on the topics on display and the students were learning while having fun.

"We were involved with the children's programmes from the earliest days and pioneered the concept of hands-on activities. It was a real learning experience", recalls FOM volunteer Nancy Hawes, who started children's craft programmes. "The first time we held them we had examples of projects and every child reproduced the examples. After several tries we found that showing slides of themes and ideas seemed to work best. I remember one boy who, when we were making houseboats, constructed a Malacca style coffee house with tables and chairs and plants in Chinese bowls."

Today's Children's Discovery Gallery (CDG) evolved from a Young People's Gallery which was created in the early 1980s to exhibit the artwork of students. Local teachers were seconded from schools for up to two years to develop programmes for students and this led to the formation of the Discovery Room - an area located in a small space within the National Museum which was, in reality, the meter



Genevieve Peng, now Assistant Director-Children's Discovery Gallery, recognised the potential and pleaded with the director for more space and there was no turning back.



1990

- FOM participates in special projects for new exhibitions
 - *The Rice Festival*
 - *Our Immigrant Past*
 - *Rites of Passage*



- First Japanese Fair
- Library returns to National Museum

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The gallery was transformed following the National Museum's major renovation in the early 1990s. Space was specifically dedicated and exhibitions were designed to capture the imagination of younger students. The aim - to ensure that these young visitors appreciated that museums can be fun to visit, to enable them to learn about the contents within the gallery and to ensure that the children would wish to return.



Genevieve and enthusiastic, committed and extremely creative volunteers now plan, build, test and implement a variety of exhibitions. Each exhibition has a lifespan of between three to twelve months - most averaging six. Themes are appropriate to school curricula.

Exhibitions contain a large variety of learning 'tools' - all of which involve and fascinate the students. There are displays of objects which can be touched and used in the organised activities, displays

of photographs and pictures which become points for discussion, games relevant to the subjects of the exhibitions, stories read and songs sung. Sometimes the children dress up, play instruments and create things they can take home to proud families along with the colourful workbooks they complete during their visits to reinforce the key learning points.

Our volunteers come from all walks of life - a mix of Singaporeans (including National Servicemen who volunteer during their free time) and many other nationalities, bringing enormous diversity to the group. It is not long before

all these volunteers become totally dedicated to CDG, the museum and the students. Genevieve describes them as a 'family' and is astounded at the lengths they go to in order to ensure that the exhibitions are successful.

On more than one occasion teams have travelled outside Singapore, at their own cost, to gain in-depth knowledge of a topic, for example to Malacca to learn more about the preparations and celebrations involved in a Peranakan wedding. One volunteer 'volunteered' her husband to take a video camera into villages in India during one of his business trips to capture a Thereukoothu 'street performance' which is no longer seen in Singapore. Historically, our volunteers have supplied objects for the displays: puppets, masks, kites and other objects have been sourced from all over Asia during vacations and holidays abroad specifically for CDG exhibitions.



Once exhibitions have been planned and constructed, the role of the volunteers changes. They learn how to encourage the children to participate in gallery activities and how to support students who might be very shy or even difficult on the day! Our 'teachers' are coached to ensure that the children gain the maximum level of fun and enjoyment while learning. As one volunteer, who has been an integral part of CDG for many years, says, "The whole idea is to have fun and if students learn just one thing it will have made our day."

1991

- Evening lecture series introduced
- Docent refresher training introduced



- 'Worker bees' term introduced for willing ad hoc volunteers
- Introductory lecture series linked to Friday morning lecture series

So, if we had peeped into the gallery over the years what might we have seen? We would have seen children building kites, smelling local spices, wearing ethnic masks, dressing one another in Chinese opera costumes, wearing Chinese operatic make-up, performing on stage, playing a gamelan, creating a Wayang puppet theatre ... and so much more.



What we would not have seen was the knowledge being absorbed - the knowledge secretly stored in each corner of the exhibitions, in each of the activities: the ability to recognise and name star constellations, to understand the development of Singapore's history and cultural roots, to know how to address family members in different ethnic groups, to gain an understanding of the variety of festivals, their meanings and their value to everyone ... and again, so much more.



As this author looked through the exhibition files, through the vast library of photographs, through the details of the activities and the workbooks she felt elated, astounded and in total wonder over the dedication of everyone involved. It is no wonder that schools rush to reserve places for their students as soon as a new exhibition is announced; no surprise that

children bring their families and friends to the gallery following their school visit; and it is a remarkable achievement to all who have supported CDG through the years that nearly 10,000 students and parents were guided by the volunteers during the *When I Was Born* exhibition which ran for twelve months and closed in March 2003.

"My wish for the new Children's Discovery Gallery is to be comparable to any you would find in renowned museums in America, Australia and other countries and for the children to really enjoy the learning opportunity in an interactive, multi-media environment," answered Genevieve when asked about her goals for the future of the gallery following the extensive renovation of SHM which began in 2003 - and then she added that she hoped children would want to return to the museum and take their children to museums in the future.



Surely Genevieve should feel that part of her goal and the goals of the volunteers are already being realised. When a student was recently asked why he had visited CDG on a Saturday, he replied: "I like this exhibition so much, so I have brought my parents - and see, I am the guide."

1992

- Student tours in the National Museum introduced (school tours)
- Docent training committee: formal name given to long-standing training committee
- Introduction of 'Wednesday evenings at my house' series discussion group

- Japanese docents (40) carry out translation project for the National Museum
- Membership: 700