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2003

### 12. New Directions

Friends of the National Museum Singapore

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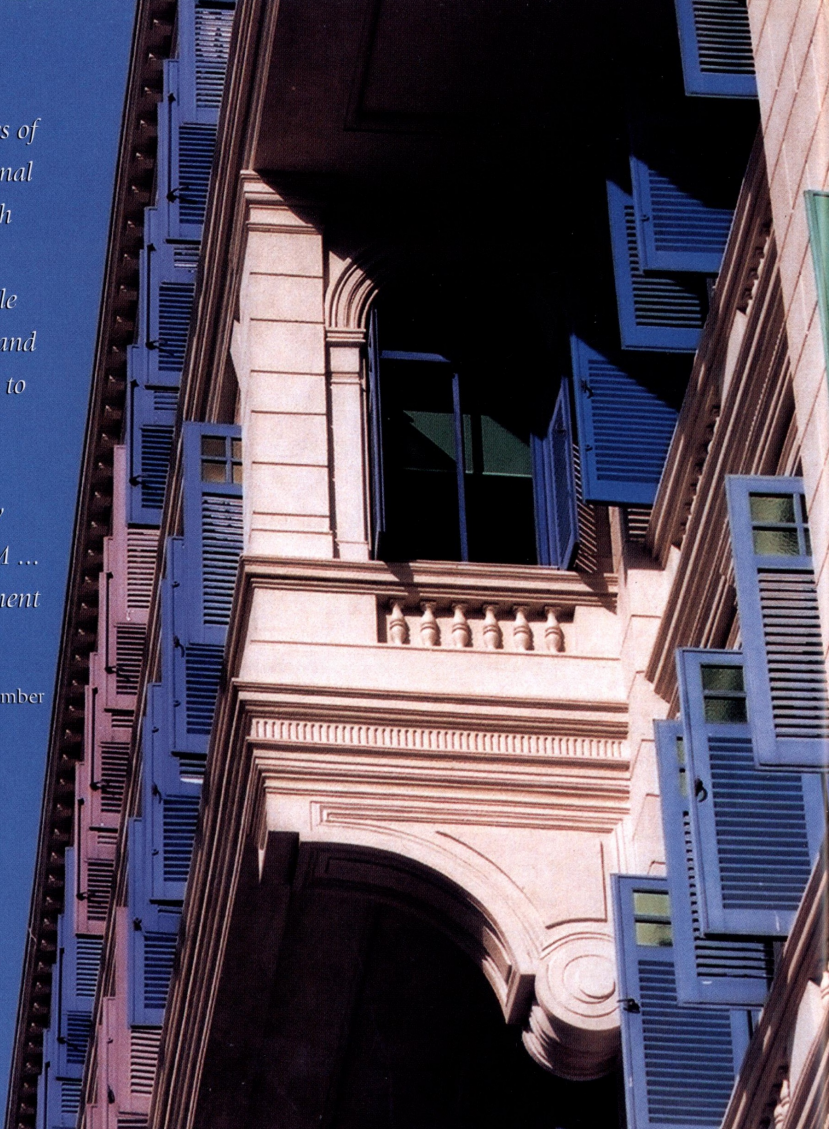
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*"My memories of the first few weeks of organising the Friends of the National Museum are the ones that stick with me most. One of the best things to come out of it was the interest people had in learning something new ... and going on with their new knowledge to create interesting careers based on Asian art: doctorates, books, ocean excavations etc. It was a very heady time ... we lived and breathed FOM ... each new day brought some excitement or new hurdle."*

- Anne Tofield, FOM founder member



# New Directions

*"The world is your exercise-book, the pages on which you do your sums. It is not reality, although you can express reality there if you wish. You are also free to write nonsense, or lies, or to tear the pages."*

'Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah',  
Richard Bach

Life is a journey of discovery for anyone who ventures onto the untrodden path ahead. For many members of the Friends of the National Museum, participation and involvement in the organisation have created new journeys of professional growth and personal fulfilment. Here there is only space to mention a few but they are representative of many, many more.

Low Sze Wee, 33, began his career as a lawyer in 1996. At the same time, due to his personal interests in the visual arts, he also joined the pioneer batch of trainees for the weekend docent training programme. To Sze Wee, this was an excellent opportunity to learn more about art as well as to work closely with the newly opened Singapore Art Museum.

"I gained a lot through the docent training programme: learning about Singapore and her artists and meeting many new like-minded friends who share similar interests. On a personal level, the experiences also opened



my eyes to career options that were available in the art community."

Sze Wee continues: "While I enjoyed my two years of litigation work and working with my colleagues in the law firm, I also felt a gnawing sense of lack of job satisfaction. Being an idealist, I felt that if I were to spend the next thirty years of my life at work, it was important that I do something that I enjoy so that work does not become too much of a chore. The

more I interacted with fellow lawyers, and also curators who crossed my path in my docent activities, I began to see a stark difference between the two circles of professionals. The lawyers holding prestigious jobs were well paid - yet, many were not happy with what they were doing. Many of them seemed to have a deep desire to do something else, but the question was always 'what'?

"On the other hand, the professionals whom I met in the art circles, especially the curators, may not have been as highly paid, despite highly demanding and stressful jobs. Yet, I observed that they enjoyed what they did and were imbued with a strong sense of fulfilment. I began to understand that they created their own success and happiness by choosing to journey along a path that they believed in and had a passion in. With this new insight gained, I began to seriously consider a career change."

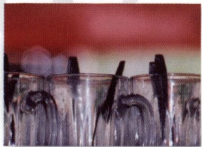


1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993 1993

## 1993

Formation of the National Heritage Board Children's Discovery Gallery created: quarterly exhibitions are planned, created and guided by FOM volunteers

- FOM donates *Qing Dynasty ink stone* to the National Museum



- FOM assists with the cataloguing of National Museum's art collection
- FOM participates in research for new exhibition, *Singapore Cultural Mosaic - the Bobrias and Khojas*
- Japanese tours increase to two per week
- Library moves to 'Container 1' - National Library car park

After much thinking, Sze Wee took that first step towards new adventures in his life. He left the legal profession to pursue a Masters degree in Art History at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and returned to Singapore with new knowledge and confidence as he assumed a new curatorial career.

Sze Wee is currently working at the Singapore Art Museum and recently curated the popular *20th Century Chinese Paintings in Singapore Collections* exhibition at SAM and also Singapore's entry into the 2003 Venice Biennale.



"I appreciated the high standards demanded by FOM and felt these helped me to 'keep my edge' while job hunting. I settled much more quickly in Singapore because its programmes introduced me to the interesting varieties of life and culture beneath the city's surface. Through the friends I made, I learned of other organisations such as AWARE and the ANZA writers' group," says Rebecca.

A significant achievement for Rebecca was the publication of 'In the Shadow of the Merlion' and 'Not all Pink Gins', two collections of stories that were inspired by the experiences of members of the ANZA writers' group when they were all new to Singapore.



While FOM continues to reshape the lives of some Singaporean members, people of other nationalities have also seen their lives here transformed.

Rebecca Poston arrived in Singapore in 1992. As a newcomer, she found it difficult to find employment upon arrival. It was a chance attendance at an FOM Monday morning lecture that led to new opportunities in Rebecca's life. She began to lead study groups and

soon gave lectures herself on Monday mornings. Through her years of volunteering, Rebecca has chaired the projection (now presentation) committee and also coordinated both the Monday morning and Friday evening lecture series.

Nancy Hawes, a former FOM president, went on to build a new and distinguished career when she returned to the United States thanks to her experiences in Singapore. After gaining a Masters degree in Museum Education, she has worked for the Asia Society for many years, heading up their Houston office. This Society is one of the most influential organisations in the United States in the field of educating Americans about Asia, in matters of policy as well as art.

"My experience at the National Museum in education, cataloguing, docenting and lecturing led me to do my degree and then to my new job where I draw on all those skills," she says. "And it gave me the dedication to teach Americans about Asia and an understanding of how important this knowledge is in our shrinking world."

1994 1994 1994 1994 1994 1994 1994 1994 1994 1994 1994 1994

1994

- First graphics appear in newsletter
- Discovering Singapore series replaces 'Thursday mornings at my house'



- Children's Discovery Gallery reintroduces regular holiday workshops
- Membership: **900**
- Library moves from 'Container 1' to 'Container F'



Other current and former FOM members have also found that their research, travel and discoveries while exploring the peoples and cultures of Singapore and nearby Southeast Asian countries have resulted in the publication of several books. Mary Connors ('Lao Textiles and Traditions'), Alice Yen Ho ('Old Kuching', 'At the South-East Asian Table'), Sarnia Hayes Hoyt ('Old Penang', 'Old Malacca'), Maya Jayapal ('Old Singapore'), Maura Rinaldi ('Kraak Porcelain: A Moment in the History of Trade') - to name just a few.

FOM members who have changed directions in their lives as a result of their experiences within the organisation have reaped the rewards of the experiences themselves. Eyes and senses have been opened in areas where the individuals had not imagined they would find such all-consuming interests. This has led to ongoing study, in some cases the establishment of wonderful private collections of artworks,

textiles and craftwork and in some instances the creation of related enterprises.

FOM has also provided the opportunity for many of our artistically talented members to exhibit their own work to the public through our Art Shows arranged in National Heritage Board museums. At the end of 2003 a Photographic Show will display the abilities of several of our creative photographers - one of whom was responsible for the magnificent full-page illustrations in this book.

Members frequently share how astounded they are to find that their lives have been influenced so positively by taking, what at first seemed, a simple step - joining a group to discover a little about the culture and arts of the region and to make a few friends with like-minded interests.

An unexplored career path, an exploration of unfamiliar culture and environment ... FOM presents a new world of volunteerism, endless learning, new friends and fresh opportunities that are boundless.



## 1995

Official opening of Singapore History Museum (SHM)

- Visitors guided by English-speaking docents
  - 1,000 on regular tours
  - 4,000 on student tours
  - 127 special tours
- Introduction of Monday morning lecture series (replacing Friday mornings)
- Introduction of mini-study groups for beginners

- First Singapore Art Museum docent training course
- FOM donates two works of art to SAM: 'Sunset' by Dr Jolly Koh Cheng Whatt and 'Tree of Life' by Brother Joseph McNally
- NHB presents 'Certificates of Appreciation' to docents for the first time