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13. Reaching Out to the Wider Community

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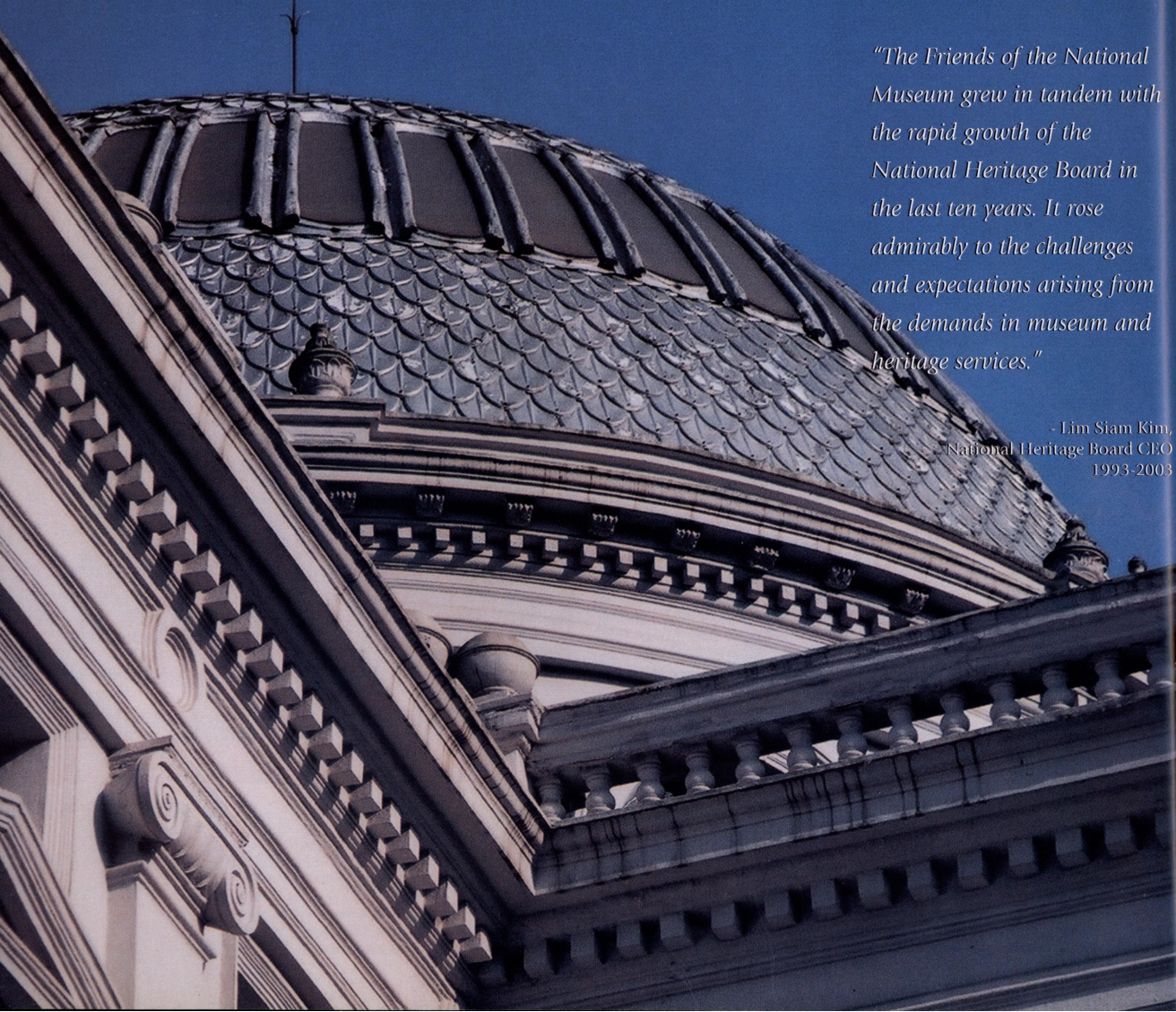


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"The Friends of the National Museum grew in tandem with the rapid growth of the National Heritage Board in the last ten years. It rose admirably to the challenges and expectations arising from the demands in museum and heritage services."

- Lim Siam Kim,
National Heritage Board CEO
1993-2003

Reaching Out to the Wider Community

On your last visit to one of the museums, you may have spotted a hopeful-looking person waiting patiently in the lobby. This person is neither a visitor nor a museum staff member; he or she is a Friends of the National Museum docent, who is more than happy to show you around the exhibitions for free. You might also have caught sight of parents with their children edging towards a colourful space in the Children's Discovery Gallery or Ace Space, where they would be welcomed by a group of friendly volunteers.

Docent guiding and children's programmes are two areas in which FOM introduces the public to the museums. There are, however, many other projects in which we make an organised effort to involve ourselves, to reach out to the larger Singaporean community. In this article we only offer a quick glimpse of what we have achieved in our contributions to the community and to the public in the past twenty-five years.

From our earliest years FOM, although primarily occupied with establishing and running study groups and members' programmes,



presenting lectures, working with the museum's education services at the Discovery Gallery and supporting the museum's exhibitions and similar initiatives, has also centred on engaging more sectors of the population in Singapore's heritage and arts.

There are many examples of such projects in the 1980s. Adjustments were made to the children's workshops to cater to the needs of disabled children - in order to help them discover the artist in themselves. Our volunteers coordinated a series of monthly art demonstrations, initiated by the National Museum, to

acquaint the public with local artists. Volunteers also supported the museum's audio-visual project for schools in 1984 in the form of a *History of Singapore* gallery. As part of the National Museum's centennial celebrations in 1987, we put together a children's activity book aptly entitled 'Magical Museum Tour' to entertain young visitors. The following year, we produced a video entitled 'A Day in the Life of a Nonya' for an exhibition on Peranakan heritage which made the public's museum experience a more interactive one.



1996

- Official opening of Singapore Art Museum (SAM)
- First regular 'Message from the President' appears in the newsletter
- Formation of the members' programmes committee

- Japanese docents translate *Dioramas* brochure for SHM
- Membership: 850

The 1990s saw an expansion in the scope of FOM activities. In the mid-nineties, we collaborated with the Ministry of Education and the National Heritage Board to develop three heritage trails to help students to better appreciate the nation's history, culture and diversity in a more proactive way. Armed with these informative activity books and maps, students and teachers could explore three heritage districts to learn about them on their own.

In 1999, FOM ran a series of workshops to train student representatives to become qualified museum guides for their schools. One of our members who volunteered to conduct the sessions, Liesel Strauss, found that the preparations involved more work than a docent's usual routine "because these were students who came for serious learning." However, what carried the day for Liesel was her satisfaction that she was able to help students take the first step to becoming guides themselves, so that they could eventually interest their schoolmates in the museums.

What is remarkable about these contributions is not their quantity but what they reveal about us. In each assignment, FOM volunteers go the extra mile to get things done well. Tan Chee Koon, Executive Director of the National Volunteer Centre, recalls how much effort our members put into their work. "They went beyond guiding. They also took part in the planning and setting up of the exhibits. A lot of research went into the set up. There is commitment and sometimes a volunteer would do up the exhibit out of her own pocket. I remember when a volunteer went so far as to go to Kelantan to buy some of the props for the kite exhibition."



We also stand out as volunteers because we have taken volunteerism a step further in terms of the professionalism we bring to all we do. We bring with us a maturity, precision and thoroughness cultivated from networking and the learning opportunities we receive at FOM.

Members who have volunteered for Dr John Miksic's archaeological excavations since 1987, for instance, surprised him with their seriousness and enthusiasm. He was impressed with the fact that they "understood archaeology wasn't about expecting to find something exciting everyday. Using the proper methodology becomes the goal". Unlike most volunteer activities, archaeological volunteers need to accept this philosophy. Volunteers realised that this was the attitude that they had to assume at the dig through regular networking - a staple feature of FOM.

Being able to take this attitude on board means we are able to painstakingly carry out the routine work that sometimes leads to important finds. This happened in 1987 when an extraordinary discovery of hundreds of tiny glass beads was made on Fort Canning Hill, which has since shed new light on Singapore's distant past. According to Dr Miksic, "We don't have any historical record about the beads in the context of Singapore ... in the first round of sifting through the soil samples we hadn't even seen them, although they must have been there all along. They were only discovered when the soil was washed and forced through the wire mesh - and FOM volunteers were doing this. I think this was a very important find."

1997

- Official opening of Asian Civilisations Museum Armenian Street (ACM)
- Current mission statement compiled
- FOM participates in Empress Place archaeological excavation

- Formation of research committee
- FOM researches 'Heritage Tour of Singapore' for NHB and MIE
- Membership: 1200



At this point, looking over these outstanding qualities, one might wonder, what motivates these volunteers? For Sue Williams, who hopes her research on the Bidadari cemetery will bring out a little known aspect of Singapore's social history and prove to be an aide-mémoire for future generations of Singaporeans, it is generally a belief and passion for what she is doing: "I am a strong believer in the fact that a people must have a knowledge and respect for its past to live the present and prepare for the future."

Reflecting on her many years of service with FOM, from an ordinary member to international delegate, Julia Oh believes that while she may have given much to FOM and the museums in Singapore, she has also received much in return. "At the age of fifty-six, my universe is still opening up as I attend meetings around the world and have even prepared and given a lecture at a symposium in Spain on issues to do with volunteering in museums."

1998

- Friends of the National Museum, Singapore celebrates twentieth anniversary
- MITA 'Award of Appreciation' presented to the Friends of the National Museum
- Friends of the National Museum, Singapore elected to represent associate members on the council of WFFM (1998-2005)

- FOM logo revised
- First web site pages created
- Administrative/fiscal year changes to 1 October - 30 September
- New format newsletter