3-2018

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Published in The state and the arts in Singapore: Policies and institutions, pp. 241-265. World Scientific. 2018. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789813236899_0012

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> *The arts should not be pursued only for their own aesthetic values as they impinge on all aspects of society — social, cultural and economic. It is like the barometer that can be used to measure the vibrancy and spirit of the nation.* (Committee on Visual Arts, 1988, p. 4)

Introduction

In the 1960s, artist Ho Ho Ying infamously lamented that Singapore was a "cultural desert", to which many artists who have studied art overseas would not want to return (Ho, 2005, p. 64). This sentiment was shared by artist Liu Kang, who claimed that the lack of a proper art museum, where "ordinary citizens can go and experience works of fine art" and where artists can "study works of art by ancient and contemporary masters", has resulted in a population that is "spiritually impoverished" (Liu & Ho, 2005, p. 53).

When Ho called Singapore a "cultural desert", it was certainly not in reference to the vibrant amateur arts scene that was already in existence. For although the arts and culture were not national priorities for the newly-independent country, prior to the 1970s, the visual arts landscape was mostly sustained by strong private initiatives. From the Nanyang style's romanticised portrayals of Southeast Asian life from the 1950s to the Equator Art Society's anti-colonialist and nationalist narratives during the 1950s and 1960s, the visual arts community saw its fair share of early movements. Artists also organised themselves. In 1938, artist Lim Hak Tai and a group of passionate artists established Singapore's pioneer arts education institution — the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Art societies such as The Society of Chinese Artists (established in 1935), The Singapore Art Society (SAS) (1949), The Malay Art Society (1949) and The Modern Art Society (1963), of which Ho was once president, were the main promoters of the visual arts, by organising art exhibitions and competitions. In particular, the SAS's "Annual Exhibition of Works by Local Artists" was a major platform for exhibiting local art to the public. The SAS also had a scholarship fund to assist artists to study abroad.

During the 1960s and 1970s, with many artists having returned home after studying or working overseas, more art societies were formed. Some were based around the promotion of specific mediums, such as watercolour and ink. In 1963, the Modern Art Society was formed, partly in response to the lack of critical direction and curatorial effort in the mainstream art scene. As Russell Storer recounts, modern art was exhibited alongside more traditional art forms. Despite the growth in art societies, there was a lack of art institutions and opportunities to exhibit (Nadarajan *et al*., 2007, pp. 10–11).

Instead, Ho, like Liu Kang, was describing the absence of official platforms and institutions such as museums and visual arts spaces; while the artistic amateur scene was flourishing, there were no museums or national galleries where collections of the best local and regional artworks could be found, appreciated and studied by artists and citizens. This cultural desert was the result of the government's attention to bread and butter issues, or as then Minister of Culture Jek Yeun Thong explained, "culture comes after other priorities" (Jek, 1974). How, then, did Singapore transform from "cultural desert" of yesteryear to a city with 51 museums and 118 art galleries in 2013, as well as an arts scene that saw more than 3.2 million visitors to the national museums in the same year (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, 2014)? This chapter will focus on institutions for the visual arts such as museums, namely, the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Singapore Art Museum, and the National Gallery Singapore. It will discuss these institutions as infrastructural projects and examine their broader ideological and political agenda such as positioning the city-state as a node between the greater Chinese and Indian civilisations, as well as to underline its status as a regional hub for the arts.

The Early Years: The State as Patron of the Arts

Concerted government support for the visual arts only began in the late 1960s, and even then, there was a clear nation-building agenda behind this support. In 1969, the former Ministry of Culture initiated the National Day Art Exhibition featuring the work of local artists. In 1986, this exhibition evolved into the Singapore Art Fair. From 1971, a series of "Art for Everyone" exhibitions were also organised at community centres.[1] The nation-building agenda was underlined by Ong Soo Chuan, then Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who explained that these art exhibitions would "contribute positively to inter-racial understanding, harmony and hence national unity" (Ong, 1973).

By the late 1970s, this cultural desert was bearing flowers. In 1978, the Cultural Foundation was established to encourage and handle donations from corporations and the public at large. In the 1980s, corporations initiated art competitions, which encouraged the creation of new local works. In 1982, the United Overseas Bank (UOB) started the first nation-wide art competition by a corporation with the UOB Painting of the Year Award. Shortly after, Shell, the multinational company, initiated the Annual Shell Discovery Art Competition in 1984. In 1987, IBM launched its eponymous Art Award. These competitions provided much-needed avenues for artists to exhibit and sell their works, and were critical in encouraging a spirit of experimentation and creativity in Singapore. By the mid-1980s, the government was organising more than a hundred visual arts exhibitions annually.[2] On the ground, local artists were also experimenting with different forms, and expanded the field beyond painting and sculpture to performance art, installations, and multimedia collaborations with other art forms such as theatre. This laid the foundations for contemporary art in Singapore. In 1987, the government launched an S$1.8 million 5-year scheme to buy works of local artists for display in the public areas of public buildings (Committee on Visual Arts, 1988, p. 22).

A Cultural Vision: Museums as Cultural Institutions for Nation-building and Regional Identity

Although the National Museum of Singapore has a history dating back to 1823, before 1979, museums were not considered a national priority. This was best explained by then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his speech at the reopening of the restored National Museum building on 16 November 1990: the old Raffles Museum "was not a top-class museum, but for many years we did nothing to change it. Culture and the arts were not of high priority. We had to take care of economics first." It was only in 1979 that the government began to take steps to utilise museums as a means to focus on Singapore's history. A Museum Development Committee was established to improve and upgrade the National Museum, which was then colloquially known as "the house of dead things" due to its lack of proper maintenance and relevance since the new government of Singapore took over in 1959 (Kwa, 2009, p. 479).

In 1984, the government released Vision 1999. The primary goal of Vision 1999 was to transform Singapore into "a city of excellence and a society of distinction" with a standard of living equal to that of the Swiss in 1984, by 1999 (People's Action Party, 1984, pp. 1–4). Vision 1999 also envisioned Singapore as a cultivated society where arts and culture can flourish. This was translated into the Cultural Vision 1999 for the Ministry of Community Development (MCD). To realise this vision, the Cultural Affairs Division at MCD changed its strategy from a promotional role to a catalytic role. It aimed to create a conducive environment for the arts and culture by: (i) encouraging participation in cultural and creative pursuits, (ii) nurturing a sense of fulfilment in non-materialistic pursuits and (iii) heightening awareness of Singapore's history and cultural heritage which would in turn promote social cohesion and patriotism amongst Singaporeans.

In 1986, MCD proposed a Heritage Link Project as a response to the Cultural Vision 1999 plan. This project claimed that the vision could be attained through the establishment of cultural institutions such as specialised museums and arts centres. MCD asked for arts and heritage activities to be housed in historical buildings in the Central Area, which would constitute a historical and cultural trail. In particular, several historical buildings in the Central Area were earmarked for museums: the former St Joseph's Institution would house a Museum of Fine Arts

[1] See Chapter 21 on the Arts and Culture Strategic Review Report in this volume for a more detailed description of the "Art for Everyone" exhibitions.

[2] For example, in 1987, the government organised 219 exhibitions, which was visited by 350,400 people (Committee on Visual Arts, 1988, p. 22).

and the former Tao Nan School would house a Children's Museum.[3] MCD also asked for the Ex-Catholic High School site to be set aside for the possible expansion of the Fine Arts Museum.

The Heritage Link Project was eventually included as an annex to the Ministry of Trade and Industry's S$1 billion Tourism Product Development Plan (TPDP). Briefly, the TPDP aimed to enhance Singapore's attractiveness as a tourist destination by calling for the preservation of Singapore's historic districts such as Chinatown, Arab Street and Little India, the rejuvenation of the Singapore River and the creation of new iconic products and events. When TPDP was approved by the Cabinet, they also agreed in principal to the earmarking of the aforementioned buildings for arts and heritage activities.

In December 1986, then Acting Minister for Community Development Wong Kan Seng appointed a taskforce to develop longer-term sustainable plans for the National Museum. Chaired by architect Tay Kheng Soon, the taskforce submitted its report on 16 July 1987. Its key recommendation was that the museum should become a "living museum linking our past with our present and future" (Kwa, 2009, p. 480). Importantly, the taskforce also explored more fundamental questions of "the role of the Museum in a city-state that was aspiring to achieve global-city status" (p. 480). It recognised that the museum's main function must be to "enable Singaporeans to relate to their heritage", while also promoting a deeper awareness of how Singapore's historical development is linked to that of the region (p. 480).

In February 1988, the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) was established to map out a programme to make Singapore a "culturally vibrant society by the turn of the century" (ACCA, 1989).[4] ACCA was supported by four Committees on Heritage, on the Visual Arts, on Performing Arts and on the Literary Arts. The Committee on Heritage — again chaired by Tay — revisited the issues and concerns of the Museum taskforce, and expanded its arguments for the importance of museums in "preserving Singapore's unique multicultural heritage and lifestyle, which defined what it means to be Singaporean" (Kwa, 2009, p. 481). Meanwhile the Committee of Visual Arts was tasked to identify factors and propose measures that would create a conducive environment for sustained growth in visual arts (ACCA, 1989, p. 48).

The Committee of Heritage's overarching recommendation was for the establishment of a National Heritage Trust, which would enable a better preservation of this unique multicultural heritage. The Committee also recommended the restructuring and expansion of the National Museum, which would enable a more effective preservation and promotion of awareness of Singapore's multicultural heritage (Kwa, 2009, p. 481). It proposed that the National Museum be expanded into a Singapore History Museum, a People's Gallery, a National Art Gallery and a Children's Museum.

These recommendations were eventually included into the main ACCA Report, which was accepted in principle by the government. Overall, the ACCA Report enabled a seismic shift that saw the state prioritise the development of infrastructure for the arts. ACCA argued for the dire need to improve the cultural facilities so as to realise its vision of a vibrant arts and culture landscape. ACCA's recommendation for a Museum Precinct was also included in the 1991 visionary policy document *Singapore: The Next Lap*. According to *The Next Lap*, "Singaporeans now aspire to the finer things in life — to the arts, culture and sports. At the same time, there is a call to preserve and explore our rich multicultural heritage" (Government of Singapore, 1991, p. 103). This inclusion illuminated the growing state recognition of the importance of museum spaces.

The release of the three Renaissance City Plans (RCPs) further affirmed this continued commitment to establishing our museums as "cultural repositories" to enhance awareness and understanding of Singapore's history and heritage (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000, p. 19). RCP III, in particular, which was released in 2008, also exalted the museums as key tourism landmarks that would position Singapore as "the choice destination for arts professionals, whether local or foreign, to create or premiere an original work rooted in Singapore's own multicultural arts and heritage, as well as the diverse ethnic traditions of Asia, in particular, Southeast Asia" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2008, p. 21).

The Formation of the National Heritage Board

The ACCA Report eventually led to the formation of the National Heritage Board (NHB) on 1 August 1993. The former National Museum, National Archives and the Oral History Department were merged to form the NHB.

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[3] Eventually, the St Joseph's Institution site would house the Singapore Art Museum, and the old Tao Nan School building would house the Peranakan Museum.

[4] See Chapter 5 in this volume for a more detailed analysis of the ACCA Report.

NHB was granted statutory board status under the then Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). Its broad role was to preserve and promote public awareness of the cultural heritage of communities in Singapore through its primary function of managing local museums, heritage institutions, and artefacts. As a statutory board, NHB receives funding from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), its parent ministry. The Board is overseen by a chairperson and administrated by the Chief Executive Officer. Today, NHB functions primarily as a museums board, overseeing the operation of the National Museum of Singapore, the Singapore Art Museum (until 2013), and the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), the Peranakan Museum, the Singapore Philatelic Museum and Reflections at Bukit Chandu. Other heritage institutions under the NHB include the Heritage Conservation Centre, the Indian Heritage Centre, the Malay Heritage Centre, and the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. NHB also oversees the National Archives of Singapore and the AV Archives Unit & Oral History Centre.

Once formed, NHB immediately began work on increasing the number of museums in Singapore and bringing visitors to the museums. One of ACCA's recommendations was to develop a museum precinct around the foot of Fort Canning Hill, which later became part of the Civic District. ACCA envisaged this museum precinct to be the centre of the historical and cultural heritage of Singapore. This centre would consist of five buildings: a Fine Arts Gallery in the former St Joseph's Institution building, a Children's Museum in the former Tao Nan School Building, a History of Singapore Museum in the present National Museum building, a Southeast Asian/Natural History/Ethnology Museum and a People's Gallery.

The National Museum: Nation-building Through the Display of the Singapore Story

The National Museum of Singapore (NMS) is the country's oldest museum dating back to 1823. In that year Sir Stamford Raffles announced his vision of a Malay College. The establishment of a library and museum were also suggested as a means of diffusing knowledge. During these early years, the museum existed primarily as a section of the Singapore Library.

It was not until 1887 that the Raffles Library and Museum Building had a home to call its own, at its current building at Stamford Road. In terms of direction, the museum was greatly influenced by 19th century European museology, "favouring the presentation of an encyclopaedic worldview, with objects classified in a taxonomic manner specific to their purpose and origins" (p. 73)

The museum was renamed the National Museum in 1960 and was soon repositioned as an institution for nation-building. In tandem with its educational outreach role, a Young People's Gallery for showcasing student artworks was created in 1973. In 1976, the first permanent gallery for visual art in Singapore was started. Many of our pioneering local artists including Liu Kang and Georgette Chen have been showcased in this National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG).

In 2003, the museum was redeveloped to the tune of $132.6 million. From 2003 to 2006, the entire building was closed for renovation and the museum was shifted to Riverside Point at Clarke Quay. In December 2006, the museum returned to its original location at Stamford Road as the National Museum of Singapore (NMS). Four lifestyle-themed permanent galleries were added, which examined Singapore's sociocultural history through food, fashion, film and photography. Since then, NMS is known as the museum showcasing the history of Singapore. In 2014, the permanent galleries of NMS were further revamped for $11 million.

The Asian Civilisations Museum: Between China and India

Along with NMS, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) were eventually developed as part of the museum precinct. While it was clear that NMS would focus on artefacts and exhibitions relating to the history of Singapore so as to instil a sense of collective memory and national identity, SAM and ACM were established as part of the broader "Asianising Singapore" project, to be a showcase of the best of Asia. And in doing so, these two institutions were meant to locate Singapore as the crossroads between Southeast Asia on one hand, and South and East Asia, on the other, in order to ideologically align the city-state with the two great civilisations of China and India while striving to be a repository of Southeast Asian culture.

This positioning came into being when George Yeo took over the arts and culture portfolio as Acting Minister of MITA in 1990. The ACCA Report's original recommendation was for the museums to have a Southeast Asian focus (1989, p. 6). Yeo broadened this focus to include Asia. As Kwa recounts, Yeo pointed out that Singapore has "historical links not only to Southeast Asia but to a wider Asia — China, South and West Asia — from where

Singapore's multi-ethnic population emanated" (Kwa, 2009, p. 482). As such, this wider Asian focus was a more appropriate frame for Singapore's heritage and would help young generations of Singaporeans better understand their ancestral roots. Based on this, he argued that ACCA's initial recommendation for a Southeast Asian "ethnology" museum should be changed into an Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM).

The ACM was eventually established in April 1997 and was first located in the former Old Tao Nan School building on at Armenian Street. In March 2003, the ACM moved to the restored Empress Place building, where it is still housed today. From the start, ACM's *raison d'etre* was clear. ACM's mandate is to exhibit the ancestral roots of Singapore's multiethnic population in China, Southeast Asia, India and West Asia. According to its website, it is the "first museum in the region to present a broad yet integrated perspective of pan-Asian cultures and civilisations…. While Singapore's forefathers came to settle in Singapore from many parts of Asia within the last 200 years, the cultures brought to Singapore by these different people are far more ancient…. The Museum's collection therefore centres on the material cultures of the different groups originating from China, Southeast Asia, South Asia and West Asia." During his public explanation of the museum precinct, Yeo (1992) described ACM as a place intended for "all those who want to understand Asia".

For Kwa, this mandate made the establishment of the ACM the most challenging of all the museums in the precinct (2009, p. 487). The lack of a land and maritime archaeology policy, along with limited resources devoted to archaeology, has meant that Singapore had a sparse collection of the arts. Hence, the greatest challenge was the need to build up a collection from scratch, which could tell a story of Singapore's ancestral roots in Asia. One option the Museum explored was to develop a collection of rare artefacts from Asia. However, the Museum failed to convince the policymakers that it was "financially feasible and politically prudent" to invest in this collection (Kwa, 2009, p. 487). One more successful option was the persuasion of major collectors from Hong Kong and West Asia to relocate their collections to Singapore because of the precarious political conditions in their homeland. Another strategy was the provision of a tax incentive for significant donations.

These strategies enabled the ACM to open in 1997 with exhibits of Chinese ceramics, paintings and furniture loaned by a group of Hong Kong collectors. In 2003, ACM was able to open a West Asian Gallery in their new Empress Place building because of generous loans from the Tareq Rajab Museum in Kuwait. Attracted by the tax incentives, the Shaw Foundation, along with private collectors such as Edmond Chin and Annie Wee, also contributed significant parts of their collection to ACM. However, these disparate donations and loans were not sustainable and ACM had to rely on government grants to systematically build up a core collection of rare artefacts to tell a coherent story befitting of its mandate (Kwa, 2009, p. 487). Today, ACM's China collection comprises Dehua porcelain figures, Taoist and Buddhist statues, calligraphy and an assortment of decorative art. The India collection contains Chola bronzes as well as early Buddhist art. The Southeast Asian collection is equally diverse with Khmer sculptures, Buddhist art from Burma and Thailand, and temple art from Vietnam. In this way, ACM was designed to strategically position Singapore as the geocultural hub of Asia.

This positioning is part of the government's interest in "Asianising Singapore" during the 1980s to the 1997 Asian economic crisis. The East Asian Miracle and rise of the Asian Tigers unsettled and contested the Eurocentric view of the West as the dominant economic and cultural power, and gave newly industrialised countries like Singapore confidence that Asia could be an economic and cultural force to be reckoned with. As the world started to recognise the spectacular economic success and rapid urban transformation in many parts of Asia, the government started to mobilise and imagine the idea of a "New Asia" into being. This is most evident in the employment of the phrase "New Asia-Singapore" by the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) as a tagline in all of its advertising campaigns and activities. Launched in 1995, this campaign aspired to depict Singapore as the centre of a cosmopolitan and multicultural region. As then chief executive of STPB, Tan Chin Nam, explained:

> New Asia-Singapore captures the essence of today's Singapore, depicting it as a place where tradition and modernity, East and West, meet and intermingle comfortably. It speaks of a destination that has managed to preserve and nurture its Asian heritage even as Singapore embraces the economic marvels of high technology. It expresses the new dynamism that marks the entire Asian region. In many ways, Singapore's progressiveness, sophistication and unique multicultural Asian character epitomises modern Asian dynamism (cited in Dhaliwal (1996)).

The establishment of ACM hence fell neatly into the government's vision for the city-state in the region, thereby advancing the "Asianising Singapore" project. As Yeo envisioned in 1992, ACM was to be an institution that would showcase Singapore as the "centre of Asian cultures with a remarkable mix of races, languages and religions".

In April 2008, a Peranakan Museum was added as a sister museum to ACM. Operated and managed by ACM, the Peranakan Museum is the first museum in the world to showcase the Peranakan cultures of Singapore and Southeast Asia. This addition marked the start of ACM's desire to move beyond "traditionally isolated cultural categories" and explore "the cross-cultural and fused forms of artistic expression in Asia" (Chong, 2015, pp. 83–84). As Alan Chong, former director of ACM, explains, this new focus on exchange and fusion is a better reflection of the "nature of Singapore's history in the world as a port city composed of many different communities who have lived and worked together" (Chong, 2015, p. 83).

The Singapore Art Museum: National and Regional Showcase

The third museum in the precinct was SAM. Prior to SAM, the country's art museum was attached to the larger National Museum and known as the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG). The NMAG was opened in August 1976 at a cost of $1,140,000, with donations from the then Singapore Arts Council and the Lee Foundation (Jek, 1974). Its curation was broad-based, with programmes such as local, regional and global art, art and design innovations, assorted photography, as well as craft and folk art.

This eclectic programming was symptomatic of two challenges. Firstly, during the 1970s and for the most part of the 1980s, there was no clear vision for what a national arts museum should look like and what its identity should be. As an appendage of the National Museum, the NMAG effectively became a miscellaneous space for everything art-related. Secondly, and more importantly, the NMAG had a very modest permanent collection. Like most museums, the NMAG depended on donations from philanthropists and art collectors to expand its collection. However, there were precious few of those in Singapore, and none could match the stature of the Guggenheims and Rockefellers of the world. As such the Art Gallery's collection grew slowly with limited appeal to the general public.

Despite the slow growth, the collection started to outgrow its physical space and from the early 1980s, the National Museum began lobbying for a new location to house the NMAG. As a result of the Heritage Link Project, the Cabinet gave in-principal approval for the use of the St Joseph's Institution (SJI) building to house the NMAG in December 1986. The adjacent Catholic High School site was also earmarked for the future expansion of NMAG. The SJI site was 5,000 square metres, which was more than six times the NMAG's 800 square metres.

This decision was elaborated in the ACCA Report, which stated that the government would establish a "fine arts gallery in the former St Joseph's Institution. Part of the playing field facing it should be reserved for future extensions to the gallery" (ACCA, 1989, p. 6). The museum was proposed to be named the "Fine Art Museum". Restoration work on the 140-year-old SJI building began in the early 1990s to house the Fine Arts Museum and took over 2 years to the tune of S$30 million. At the same time, socialite artist and surgeon Dr Earl Lu was appointed on 18 July 1992 to lead the 11-member Fine Arts Museum Board, whose task was to acquire art works by Southeast and East Asian artists in order to position the museum as a showcase for the region and travelling global or Western masterpieces in order to draw tourists. Just before the Fine Art Museum was opened to the public on 20 October 1995, its name was changed to the Singapore Art Museum.

Through the years, SAM has managed to narrow down its originally wider-casting vision to a focus on contemporary art from Singapore and Southeast Asia, thereby providing a key exhibition platform for local contemporary art. Importantly, by positioning SAM as a site in which the best of contemporary art from Singapore and Southeast Asia could be consumed, the aim of the museum was brought in alignment with the "Asianising Singapore" project.

In fact, when SAM first opened in 1996, it already had a collection of more than 3,000 works from Singaporean and contemporary Southeast Asian artists. Over the years, SAM has managed to build a collection that is now known to be one of the world's most significant public collections of contemporary Southeast Asian artworks. This collection was established through an acquisitions policy that devotes 80% of its funds to Southeast Asian art, and the remaining 20% to the wider Asian region to provide a broader cultural context for the core collection (Singapore Art Museum, 2015). Artworks are acquired according to three categories, namely, "pioneering" contemporary artists who are known for avant-garde practices, mid-career artists and emerging practitioners. It is worth noting that although the acquisition policy focus is on acquiring works from the Southeast Asian region, there is an uneven amount of works being acquired within the places of the region, with Indonesian art being one of the most acquired.

In August 2008, the extension — SAM at 8Q — was finally opened to the public. This extension, which was housed in the Catholic High School building, added six more galleries to SAM. According to SAM, this extension,

which was 3,500 square metres, would be dedicated to the showcasing of more experimental art forms like sound art, video and photography installations.

Apart from building its collection and expanding its space, SAM has also staged several significant contemporary art exhibitions. Within its first year, apart from a 4-month long Guggenheim exhibition, SAM also staged several major exhibitions, including "A Century of Art in Singapore and Themes in Southeast Asian Art" in its first year. In 1998, it staged "Trimurti and Ten Years After", an exhibition featuring the works of three significant Singaporean artists: S. Chandrasekaran, Salleh Japar and Goh Ee Choo. Apart from showcasing more than 40 of their artworks, the exhibition included an assessment of the Trimurti exhibition initiated by the three artists in 1988, which has since been identified as one of the landmark moments in the development of contemporary art in Singapore.[5]

In 2013, Susie Lingham, an interdisciplinary arts practitioner and writer, was appointed as Director.[6] During her term, SAM has staged several provocative contemporary art exhibitions including *Medium at Large* in 2014, which explored the slippery concept of medium in contemporary art and *After Utopia: Revising the Ideal in Asian Contemporary Art* in 2015, which included several controversial artworks.[7] These two exhibitions, which presented works that may appear unconventional or unusual, highlight the complexities of contemporary art while triggering thought about the nature and boundaries of contemporary art practice. More importantly, they further positioned SAM as a defining voice of contemporary Southeast Asian art.

Apart from the appointment of a non-civil servant as Director from August 2013 to March 2016, SAM has undergone further changes since MCCY took over the arts portfolio. In late 2013, SAM underwent corporatisation by becoming an independent company limited by guarantee. A new board of directors was also appointed to oversee the management of SAM. According to the government, these moves were part of the state's plan to allow greater autonomy for the development and growth of the visual arts in Singapore. It would also give SAM's leadership greater freedom in charting out its growth and direction.

Nurturing Soul Through Museum Development

Together, the establishment of the three museums — NMS, ACM and SAM — is a key moment for the arts and culture in Singapore. Apart from these museums, there has also been state investment in proper infrastructure for the National Collection. Museums are typically defined by their collections. In Singapore, there is one National Collection under the purview of NHB. The National Collection is constituted by the collections of NMS, ACM, SAM and NGS.

Until 1990, the responsibility of caring for museum collections in Singapore fell to the curators at NMS. In 1990, this changed with the establishment of the Collections Unit and appointment of the first Registrar of the National Museum. Shortly after, a Conservation Unit was also formed. These two Units were housed at NMS and included a conservation laboratory and photography studio. They handled the access, management and documentation of the National Collection. Parts of the National Collection were stored at NMS as well as several off-site storage areas. However, these areas were not optimal storage facilities as they exposed many artefacts to fluctuating environmental conditions and pest damage.

As the number of acquisitions and loans increased over the years, the need for a centralised storage and conservation facility was needed to allow for greater operational efficiency and better preservation of artefacts. In 1995, with a government grant of $22.5 million, construction for a purpose-built facility for conservation began (Heritage Conservation Centre, 2017). On 15 September 2000, the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC) was officially opened. Today, the HCC is the official repository and conservation facility for the management and preservation of the National Collection. Its core mission is to manage, care for, and facilitate access to the National

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[5] For the Trimurti exhibition, the three artists experimented with producing artworks in multiple mediums ranging from performances, installations and paintings, thereby challenging conventional processes of art-making.

[6] Susie Lingham stepped down on 31 March 2016, after more than 2 years at the helm. However, she remained as the Creative Director of the 2016 edition of the Singapore Biennale, which is organised by SAM.

[7] "Medium at Large" comprised 31 artworks that showcased the rich variety of materials that contemporary artworks can be made from; including human hair, honey sticks, live bullet shells and dematerialised media like sound. Meanwhile, one particular artwork in the "After Utopia: Revising the Ideal in Asian Contemporary Art" exhibition is *Pinkswing Park* from Indonesian artists Agus Suwage and Davy Linggar. *Pinkswing Park* presents an imagined Eden populated by representations of an Indonesian Adam and Eve, in poses akin to major works of Western art history. When it was presented in Indonesia a decade ago at the 2005 Jakarta Biennale, it caused such a stir that the Biennale ended abruptly. Its presentation in "After Utopia" marks the first time that *Pinkswing Park* would be shown since 2005.

Collection. The HCC is housed in a six-storey building with centralised conservation laboratories and a customised storage facility.

This monetary investment did not come easily. As Kwa noted, the major challenge confronting the museums has been, and continues to be, "to justify the museum's *raison d'etre* to policymakers driven by costs-benefits analysis" (Kwa, 2009, p. 488). The successful building of the three museums hence illustrates the state's recognition of the ability of museums to "help Singapore find its soul for it cannot be by bread alone that we live" (Yeo, 1992). As the former CEO of NHB Lim Siam Kim recalled, "the government allocation for the development of the three new museums plus the blockbuster exhibitions organised in the 1990s eventually amounted to some $300 million," an inconceivable sum in the earlier decades when the arts took a lower priority relative to the economic development of Singapore as an independent post-colonial state (Kwa, 2009, p. 489).

The museums were also developed to contribute cultural capital that would define Singapore as a vibrant city with a flourishing arts scene. Speaking at SAM in 1996 at the opening of an exhibition of works loaned from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, S. Jayakumar, then Minister for Law and Foreign Affairs, opined that "this exhibition is thus not only for Singaporeans, it is also for the thousands of visitors to Singapore… More importantly, it attests to the fact that we have a variety of artistic activities which make Singapore a vibrant society in all respects for the millions of tourists and other visitors who work and live in Singapore or are here for conferences and meetings" (Jayakumar, 1996). In particular, the strategic positioning of ACM and SAM lent Singapore the veneer of possessing the cultural capital that would define it as the geocultural hub of the region. One of the major international narratives of the city-state is that it is clean and efficient but more comfortable with Western products or culture, thus fuelling the criticism that it lacks a soul or cultural core despite its multi-ethnic complexion. This can be traced back to the postcolonial leadership's early decision to down play ethnic histories in the journey towards nationhood for fear that the Chinese majority otherwise would overwhelm other ethnic minorities.

It was former Minister for Culture and Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam's decision to insist that Singapore's official history begin from 1819 so as to "forget" the multitude of histories and memories of migrants, which he called "ancestral ghosts", believing that only a state-sponsored construction of nation and national identity, purged of inconvenient narratives, stood the best chance of producing a harmonious multicultural society (Hong & Huang, 2008).

While this *tabula rasa* nation fulfilled its initial purpose, it began to yield unwanted consequences. The 1978 *Report on the Ministry of Education* submitted by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee warned of "deculturalisation" should younger generations of Singaporeans lose touch with the traditions and practices of their ethnic cultures in the face of increased mass consumption and popular culture from the West. This emergence of Confucian ethics and "Asian values" discourse as culturalist explanations for the economic success of the newly industrialised countries of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore in the 1970s and those of the "Asian tigers" like Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia in the 1990s were politically expedient. Not only did the Confucian ethics and Asian values discourse, some argue, justify authoritarian rule, they also positioned the multi-ethnic city-state as a facilitator and mediator between the great Asian civilisations. The economic awakening of China in the 1990s only fuelled the geostrategic importance of securing such a position.

Today, the three museums are part of the Bras Brasah-Bugis Precinct, which is the arts and heritage district. Apart from NMS, ACM, SAM and the Peranakan Museum, this Precinct is also home to LASALLE, NAFA and other museums such as the Philatelic Museum. Indeed, since ACCA and the three museums, there has been a growth in the number of museums. Apart from community museums such as the Chinese Heritage Centre (1995) and Malay Heritage Centre (2005), there has been a growth in privately-owned museums, which mostly showcase non-local art. For instance, in 2009, a Museum of Contemporary Arts (MOCA@Loewen) opened at Loewen Road. Developed by Linda Gallery from Jakarta, Indonesia, this space aims to present works not normally carried by the national museums in Singapore.

Notably, in February 2011, the ArtScience Museum was opened as a key attraction of the Marina Bay Sands integrated resort. ArtScience is currently the largest private museum in Singapore. In its formation years, it mostly played host to blockbuster touring exhibitions featuring globally-popular icons such as Van Gogh and Andy Warhol,[8] although in 2015, it showcased 17 local visual artworks as part of the Prudential Eye Singapore

[8] Other blockbuster touring exhibitions include "Titanic: the Artifact", "Essential Eames: A Herman Miller Exhibition", "Dali: Mind of a Genius" and "Harry Potter: The Exhibition".

Exhibition.[9] The exhibition was meant to showcase the best of contemporary art in Singapore and the artist line-up included Lee Wen, Charles Lim and Ho Tzu Nyen.

In 2013, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) facilitated the development of Singapore Pinacothèque de Paris, which was a concept modelled after the renowned Pinacothèque de Paris museum in Paris. The private art museum opened to the public in May 2015 at Fort Canning Arts Centre.[10] Although both projects were part of STB's efforts to grow Singapore's leisure offerings, the two private museums inadvertently actualised RCP II's recommendation for Singapore to develop a museum that would be a replicate of a famous Western icon such as Tate Modern or Guggenheim Bilbao, and would focus on showcasing "international contemporary and modern art works and design", so that "economic spinoffs and tourism dollars" could be generated (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2005, pp. 18–19).

This onslaught of new museum spaces and exhibitions is matched by a steady stream of visitors. Total visitorship to both national and private museums has grown steadily from about 2.1 million in 2004 to more than 8.4 million in 2013 (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, 2014). However, only 40% of these visitors are Singapore residents (Koh, 2015, p. 51). In May 2013, free admission for Singapore residents to national museums and heritage institutions was introduced as a means to encourage more Singaporeans to visit the national museums, learn about the Singapore story, and develop a greater sense of belonging to Singapore. NHB has also expanded its public and education programmes, and developed numerous outreach activities to the heartlands. As Michael Koh, chief executive of NHB from 2006 to 2013, explained, "museums need to look beyond their buildings to root themselves within their local community" (2015, p. 47).

A National Art Gallery

In January 2005, in his addendum to the President's opening of the new session of Parliament speech, then Minister of Culture Lee Boon Yang disclosed plans to house a "world-class art gallery" in the Supreme Court and City Hall buildings within 5 years. According to media reports, the budget was "uncertain" but the aim was to provide about 11,000 square metres to Singapore and Southeast Asian art (Li, 2005). This focus on Singapore and Southeast Asian art is similar to SAM's.

Later that year, in his National Day Rally (NDR) speech,[11] Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong elaborated on this idea. In this speech, the prime minister spoke about the importance of creating a vibrant city, which he defined as "a city which is full of life and energy and excitement, a place where people want to live, work and play, where they are stimulated to be active, to be creative and to enjoy life." To achieve this, "a lively arts, culture, learning and entertainment centre in the middle of the city" would be developed. Importantly, he highlighted the new National Gallery Singapore (NGS) as a key destination of this centre.

This mention of the NGS in the NDR speech, as well as housing it in two iconic heritage buildings, both of which have been gazetted as national monuments since 1992, highlighted the firm commitment and determination of the government to recognise art museums as key "cultural repositories" that would also add to the vibrancy of the city.[12] According to Tan Chin Nam, then permanent secretary of MICA, the NGS was an investment to strengthen Singapore's soft power: "(M)any foreigners often view Singapore as a calculative and efficient society. We'd like to combat this stereotypical image and present them with a new and more holistic vision of Singapore" (Li, 2005). In 2008, then Culture Minister Lee also described NGS as an institution that will "do for the visual arts what the Esplanade had done for the performing arts and become a cultural destination for all Singaporeans and visitors to enjoy" (Lee, 2008).

The NGS was officially opened at the end of November 2015, more than 10 years after its conceptualisation and more than 5 years after the initial projected completion date. Reasons behind the delay include construction

[9] For more details, see http://prudentialeyeawards.com.

[10] Unfortunately, the museum had its last day of operations on 10 April 2016, citing weaker than expected visitorship and other challenges including business and financial. During the time of closure, the company which managed the museum, Art Heritage Singapore, also faced a lawsuit in Singapore initiated by an Italian exhibition organiser over a sum of about €435,000 (S$667,500) (Said & Salleh, 2016). It is also worth noting that the Paris museum also closed in February 2016 after going into receivership in November 2015.

[11] The National Day Rally has been an annual event in Singapore since 1966, and is highly regarded as one of the most important platforms for the Prime Minister to address the nation on its key challenges and future directions, and where major policy changes are announced. It can be compared to the State of the Union Address delivered by the President of the United States. For more, see Tan (2007).

[12] The City Hall was built in 1929, and it was where the then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared Singapore's independence in 1965. The Supreme Court was designed in 1937, and is the highest court of the land.

and building complications, and controversies over staffing. For example, construction only started in January 2011, as there was an earlier government-wide deferment of building projects due to high construction costs. However, since its conceptualisation, the NGS team has been involved in several local and international art projects and exhibitions. For instance, in late 2010, the NGS contributed 76 artworks of the then recently deceased Chinese painter Wu Guanzhong to the "East Meets West — The Exhibition of Wu Guangzhong" exhibition in Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou, China.[13]

NGS occupies a sprawling 64,000 square metres of built area, and costs an estimated $532 million to retrofit.[14] The NGS also has a separate budget for acquiring new pieces of art. The NGS overseas a public collection of 8,000 works of modern art from Singapore and Southeast Asia spanning the 19th and 20th centuries, including painting, photography, sculpture, printmaking and video.[15] These works will be mainly showcased in two permanent core galleries: the DBS Singapore Gallery and the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery. Currently, these two galleries are able to showcase around 400 artworks each, and also feature key pieces from private lenders and regional museums.

Apart from the two core galleries, a key feature of the NGS is the "Keppel Centre for Art Education", a dedicated multisensory space for children. The NGS has also established curatorial partnerships with France's Centre Pompidou and London's Tate Britain. For instance, from 31 March to 17 July 2016, the NGS showcased a co-curated exhibition on "Reframing Modernism". Co-curated with the Centre Pompidou, this exhibition aimed to challenge the existing paradigm of modernism with fresh perspectives using Southeast Asian art as a point of reference. The exhibition showcased key works from the collections of both institutions. Southeast Asian artists such as Vietnam's Le Pho, Singapore's Georgette Chen and Philippines' Galo B Ocampo were showcased alongside European artists like Vassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse and Robert Delaunay.

When the decision to build NGS was first announced, many local artists welcomed the news as a signal of the increasing importance of the arts to the state. According to Chinese calligrapher Tan Siah Kwee, "the government is sending out an important message by allocating such landmarks to the arts… this initiative will give a certain status to the arts industry" (Li, 2005). Others such as multidisciplinary artist Tan Swie Hian were more cautious. For Tan, although NGS will be a significant space for the exhibition of local artworks, his concern is over whether NGS will have the capabilities to pull off such shows: "This is definitely a good sign. Where can we see a proper exhibition of Chen Wen Hsi and Georgette Chen's work? Nowhere. Which is why I hope this new gallery can do such shows well" (Li, 2005).

Nevertheless, despite the government's commitment to establishing NGS as a platform to showcase the history of Singapore's art development and the best its neighbours have to offer, there have been concerns that the NGS may not be adequately equipped to competently curate an extensive showcase of Singapore and Southeast Asian art. This is especially since the histories of many of these art works are not widely known. In addition, there is no art history department in the local universities and tertiary educational institutions.[16] However, it is worth noting that two minor undergraduate programmes in art history were recently launched in NUS and NTU respectively, and LASALLE also offers a Masters of Arts in Asian Art History. Consequently, there has been a scarcity of literature on art history and art criticism in Singapore. This dearth has led critics to claim that artistic practices in Singapore have existed in a critical vacuum.

There have also been concerns raised over how the NGS would narrate and showcase Singapore's art history, particularly whether certain parts of Singapore's art history would be omitted or revised. For example, at the contemporary art section of the DBS Singapore Gallery, while there are works that responded to the controversy surrounding performance art (and the removal of its funding), the absence of the very piece that triggered the controversy — Josef Ng's Brother Cane performance in 1993 — is a rather unfortunate omission. There is also unease over whether the NGS's narrative of Singapore's art development would be sufficiently comprehensive, and include the more transient art works such as performance art pieces, as well as accounts of ground impulses and unrecorded activities such as arts-related gatherings.

Ultimately, the future role and impact of the NGS on the visual arts landscape in Singapore is unclear. This lack of lucidity may perhaps be likened to the initial trepidation, uncertainty and flak expressed over the state's

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[13] NGS was the second largest contributor amongst the eight participating art institutions.

[14] In comparison, the building of the Esplanade cost $300 million.

[15] Examples of local artists include Cheong Soo Pieng, Liu Kang, Georgette Chen, Chua Mia Tee, Chen Wen Hsi and Tang Da Wu. NGS also holds significant pieces from eminent Southeast Asian artists, including Latiff Mohidin (Malaysia), Raden Saleh (Indonesia), Imelda Cajipe-Endaya (Philippines), Svay Ken (Cambodia) and Nguyen Gia Tri (Vietnam).

[16] For more, see Sabapathy (2010).

decision to build the Esplanade during the 1990s.[17] It will be interesting to see whether the NGS will become simply another visually spectacular arts venue with well-managed facilities, or blossom into an arts space dedicated to the nurturing and promoting of local and Southeast Asian art, and an intellectual leader known for cutting-edge curatorial direction.

Conclusion

The blooming of the cultural desert was a long time in the making. It did not happen accidentally, and certainly not for art for art's sake. The amateur arts scene, particularly the visual arts community, was a lively and vibrant one in the 1950s and 1960s. With the broad ideological forces of anti-colonialism and nationalism sweeping through the region, painters could not help but be animated by the politics of the day. Indeed, the many art societies and organisations that existed then testify to the community's need to express itself in different voices. The cultural desert image that the city-state has long been saddled with was, in fact, a critique of the state's early reluctance to invest in art institutions and spaces in which artists and citizens alike could engage in a body of artworks.

This changed when the twin concerns of nation-building and economic growth collided after the 1985 economic recession. From this climate of reassessment arose the ACCA Report which reiterated the need for art spaces and infrastructure; recommendations which neatly aligned with the imperative to become a vibrant city with soul and to attract the necessary talent to achieve this. One by one, ACM, SAM and NGS came into being, each with its own ideological agenda and specific vision of Singapore's position in the world. Whether as the residual site for civilisational flows from China and India or as a showcase for the country's artistic achievements and a platform for the best of Southeast Asia, these museums have accumulated bodies of artefacts and artworks that would make Ho and Liu reconsider their early criticism.

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[17] For a more detailed discussion of the Esplanade, please refer to Chapter 15 in this volume.

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