

Singapore's  
Asian Civilisation Museum  
The Scholars Gallery

The Asian Civilisation Museum (ACM) is set on the north bank of the Singapore River and is housed in the Empress Place Building, a beautiful 19th century designed structure which was built in four stages from 1864 to 1920. It was originally planned as a courthouse, but was to become government administration buildings. The Museum moved into the building in March 2003.

The Museum is overlooked by the statue of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, who landed in Singapore in January 1819 to establish a British trading post and went on to found the city of Singapore. (Fig 1).

Singapore is a city where the old and new are often juxtaposed in interesting ways. When I last visited in September 2019, the front lawn of the Museum was inhabited with a sculpture installation of five large mirror balls entitled *24 Hours in Singapore* by the local sculptor Baet Yeok Kuan. (Fig 2.) This is also an audio installation as each of the sculptural mirror spheres emit sounds from daily Singapore life from when they were recorded in 2015, from the MRT trains, to coffee shop banter and traffic, which will, with the passage of time act as a remembrance of that period.

The idea of the old and the new and the reflection and retreat from the stresses of everyday life are some of the themes that are relevant to the creation of the scholar's studio, a place where traditionally the scholar-official literati could escape his daily administrative hell and partake of the rituals and pastimes that had been at the centre of scholarly life for thousands of years. 1.



Fig 1. View of the Asian Civilisation Museum with the Statue of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles.



Fig 2. 24 Hours in Singapore by Bet Yeok Kuan, Singapore, 2015.

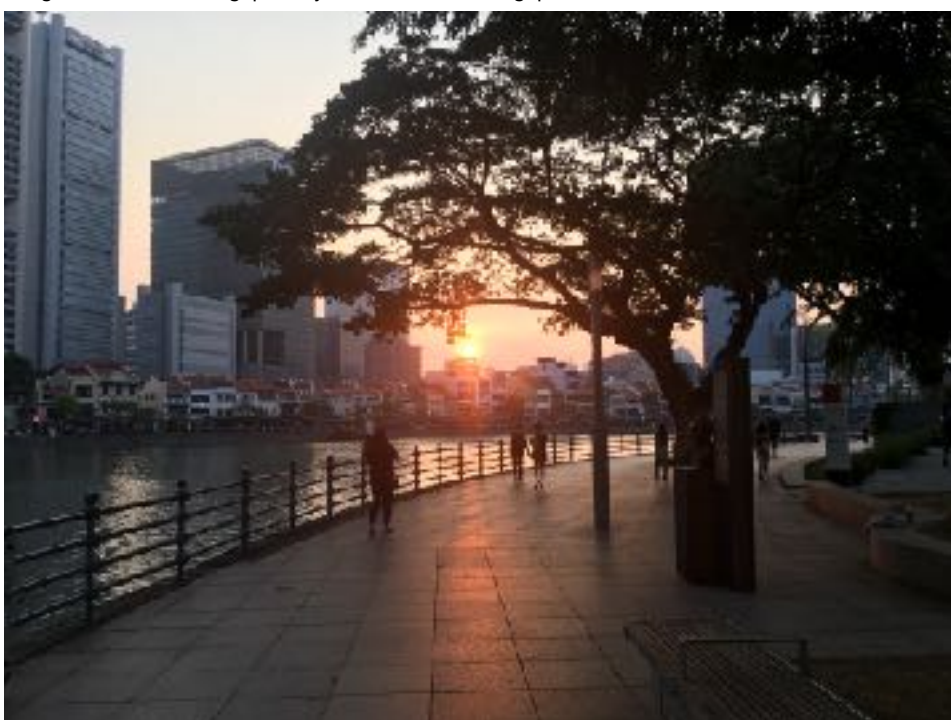


Fig 3. The Singapore River front adjacent to the Asian Civilisation Museum.

The Scholars Gallery at ACM successfully exhibits furniture and a number of objects in a thematic manner and one of the first spaces that one encounters on entering the gallery is the recreation of a studio, (Fig 4.) which features a 17th century huanghuali 'official hat' chair, a 17th century huanghuali bookcase with pierced sides that resemble cracked ice, a 19th century side table and other objects. The bookcase, bookstand and many other objects in the gallery were on loan from the Edmond Chin collection.



Fig 4. The Scholars Studio, in the Scholars Gallery.

Edmond Chin, a Singaporean, ran Christie's jewellery department in Hong Kong for 5 years from the mid 1990s and went on to establish the prestigious jewellery business Etcetera Limited.

A four-panelled pierced screen divides this space to an open area behind, where an 18th century Lingbi scholar's rock stands on a Fujian province 16th/17th century Blackwood trestle table. This is adjacent to a pair of 19th century Fujian Blackwood chairs and table which stand in front of two framed calligraphy scrolls. (Fig 5.)



Fig 5. Fujian Blackwood furniture in the Scholars Gallery.

The somewhat understated uncluttered style of these two displays quite accurately represents the scholar's aesthetic, which was to create a space where they could practice the high arts of painting, calligraphy and poetry, play strategic games as *weiqi* (go) and appreciate art and antiques (preferably with other scholars), as well as burn incense and play the *qin*.<sup>2</sup> These studios would often be located at the periphery of a house, which would allow for views of nature to provide inspiration for their pursuits.

From as early as the Sui dynasty (581-618 AD) the Chinese established a meritocratic civil service to administer the country based on a national examination system. The examinations were based on knowledge of the Confucian classical texts and a sound grasp of military strategy, civil law, taxation and geography, as well as knowledge of the arts, music, poetry, painting and calligraphy.<sup>3</sup>

There were times during the career of these officials that they would need to recede from public life if they were on the wrong side of certain political allegiances, which would give them the opportunity to escape to nature alone or with like minded friends to follow these artistic pursuits.

Around the perimeter of the gallery are a number of cabinets, the first displaying implements that would be used by the scholar for painting, such as brush pots, crafted from bamboo and porcelain, a Kangxi mark and period peach-bloom water pot, a bamboo inscribed brush washer and a ceramic brush rest. (Fig 6.)



Fig 6. Scholar's implements cabinet.

The Kangxi/Yongzheng period cloisonné enamel stand or arm rest in the form of an unfurled hand scroll is particularly striking. It is decorated with rows of diaper imitating silk brocade in red, yellow and dark blue enamel on a pale blue ground. (Fig 7.) It was purchased with funds from the Hong Leong Foundation (set up by the Malaysian conglomerate Hong Leong Group) from J.J. Lally in his spring 2015 exhibition, *Chinese Art From the Scholar's Studio*. 4.

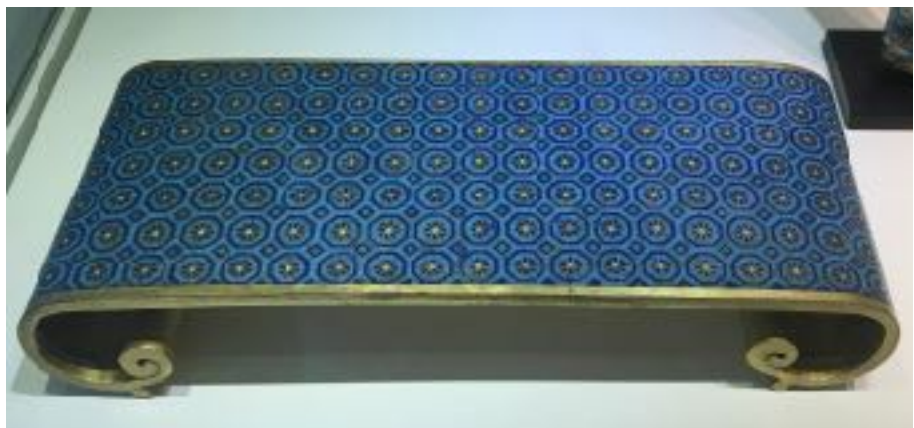


Fig 7. Cloisonne scroll-form stand/arm rest, Kangxi/Yongzheng period, 40.3cm long.

The next three cabinets contain objects relating to *weiqi*, painting and music (Figs 8, 9 and 10). The blue and white *weiqi* jar and cover is dated to the Kangxi period and is painted with a *qilin* to the cover. (Fig 8.)

The two brushes are made of animal hair and wood and bamboo respectively. The larger brush, known as *doubi*, was used for writing large characters and had a short thick handle which allowed it to be wielded easily. (Fig 9.) Brushes with soft hair, typically made from goats were used for characters with thicker lines and for applying colour washes to paintings. Harder brushes, generally made from rabbit and weasel were used for fine details and for smaller characters.



Figs 8 and 9. Blue and white *weiqi* box and cover, Kangxi period and two brushes.

The last cabinet contained a pair of inscribed Qing dynasty bamboo flutes, but the most unusual exhibit was the 17th century blue and white flute. This is particularly rare and is similar in shape to Dehua flutes in white porcelain that were made at at similar date. (Fig 10.)



Fig 10. A pair of blue and white flutes, Qing dynasty, a blue and white flute, 17th century and a zither form inkstick, Qing dynasty.



Fig 11. Cabinet of playthings, luohan and scholar implements.

The next display depicts a cabinet of playthings and scholar implements, as well as a number of jades and figures of luohan carved in different materials. (Fig 11.)

The figure of a luohan in a grotto was a popular subject in the late Ming early Qing dynasty in paintings and in jade. The subject of the solitary luohan communing with nature would have appealed to the scholar literati. It is possible that the vogue for the subject of luohan in grottos was stimulated by a woodblock print from the 18th century catalogue *Gu you tu pu*. 5. (Fig 14.)

The jade boulder (Fig 12.) depicts a luohan seated in a grotto reading a tablet, whilst a censer burns to his right. The jade carver uses the large pebble effectively and some of its russet colour is incorporated into the leaves of the tree and at the top of the grotto.

Adjacent to the luohan is a large the pale celadon mountain. (Fig 13.) Jade mountains and scholar's rocks adorned the scholar's table as they depicted landscapes in miniature and no doubt stimulated the imagination. This example is beautifully carved with various undulating ridges and recesses which create an effective interplay between light and shadow.



Fig 12. A pale celadon jade luohan in grotto, Qianlong period,



Fig 13. A pale celadon mountain, 17th century.



Fig 14. Figure of a luohan in a grotto from the *Gu you tu pu*.



Fig 15. Soapstone figure of a luohan, Kangxi Period.

Luohans were carved in other materials such as soapstone, (Fig 15.) which were worked to a very high standard from the late Ming dynasty through to the Kangxi period and the best examples were signed by artists such as Zixiu, Yang Yuxian and Zhou Bin.

The example exhibited here is carved in great detail with the facial features and the foliate decoration on the hem of robes carefully picked out. The carver also cleverly uses the two colours of the stone for the robe and the skin.

The final display was of ceramics and the first of these dealt with the some of the classic shapes and their derivation, (Fig 16.) such as a Kangxi blue and white gu-shaped vase with an archaic Shang dynasty bronze gu vase and an 18th century Ge-style hu-shaped vase with a Ming archaistic bronze example.

The interest in antiquity and the re-interpretation of classical forms in a modern medium would have very much appealed to the aesthetic of the scholar official, who were often keen collectors.

The most significant ceramics on display were the two blue and white Ming examples. (Fig 17.) The first was the Xuande mark and period (1426-1435) 'dragon' washer. It is of ten-petaled mallow shape and is painted to the interior with a lively five-claw dragon flying amongst cloud and flame scrolls. The exterior is painted with a small dragon within a quatrefoil panel to each facet.

The second piece is a Zhengde mark and period (1506-1521) brush rest in the form of a five peaked mountain. It is inscribed in Arabic script to both sides with the words *khamah* (pen) and *dan* (holder). The Zhengde Emperor was greatly interested in foreigners and asked many Muslims to serve as advisors and envoys at his court. This piece may have been made for the emperor or one of these courtiers.

The Scholars Gallery at ACM is a light and airy space and is a delight to walk through. It is an interesting, well-curated permanent exhibition giving insight into the world of the scholar official through a variety of objects made from a wide range of material.



Fig 16. Cabinet of ceramics showing the derivation of their shape from earlier bronzes.



Fig 17. Zhengde blue and white brush rest and a blue and white Xuande mark and period 'dragon' washer.



Fig 18. Blue and white vases, from 15th to the 17th century.



Fig 19. A three-tiered tixi lacquer box, Ming dynasty, 15th century.



Fig 20. A Lacquer, bone and mother of pearl inlaid box and cover in the form of scrolls and books and a mother-of-pearl inlaid box and cover, 14th century.



Fig 21. A cloisonné enamel ruyi sceptre, Qing dynasty, 18th century.

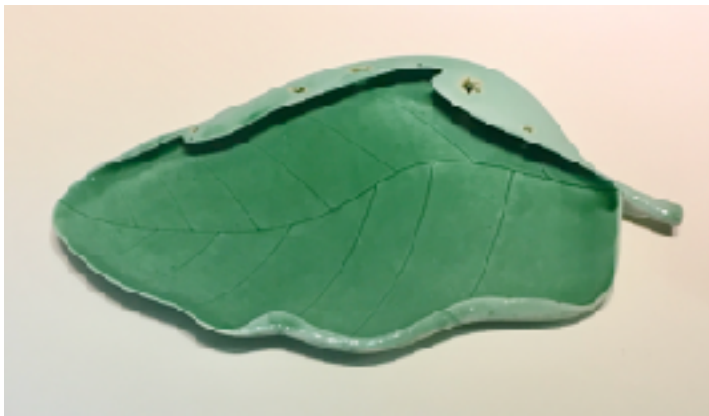


Fig 22. A porcelain green-glazed leaf-shaped dish, Qing dynasty, 18th/19th century.



Fig 23. A bamboo and ivory 'luohan' brushpot, Qing dynasty, 18th century.



Fig 24. A cinnabar lacquer table screen and stand, depicting a gathering of scholars, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period.



Fig 25. A Longyan wood figure of a luohan, Qing dynasty, 18th/19th century.



### Notes

1. Flacks, Marcus, *Custodians of the Scholar's Way, Chinese Scholars' Objects in Precious Woods*, 2014, p. 61.
2. *Ibid*, p. 61.
3. *Ibid*, p. 13.
4. J.J. Lally, *Chinese Art from the Scholar's Studio*, New York, 2015, cat no.19.
5. Rawson, Jessica, *Chinese Jade From the Neolithic to the Qing*, British Museum, 1995, p. 411.



A PALEMBANG PRINCE, SANG NILA UTAMA WAS SAID TO HAVE ARRIVED ON OUR WHITE SANDY SHORES IN 1299. HIS VISION OF A CREATURE LED TO THE FOUNDING OF A FLOURISHING PORT CITY, AND WAS HOW WE DERIVED OUR NAME - SINGAPURA, THE LION CITY.