



Publication: The Straits Times Life!
Date: May 6 2008
Headline: HStory: Museums are in his blood

HStory

Asian Civilisations Museum head Kenson Kwok is retiring at the end of the year, after 17 years of making history come alive. He tells **DEEPIKA SHETTY** that he plans to travel, take up yoga and learn Latin so he can read the inscriptions on Roman monuments.

Page 2



Museum doyen Kenson Kwok wants to visit Rome after he retires at the end of the year, and you can expect a museum to be on his itinerary



Deepika Shetty

WORK has taken Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) director Kenson Kwok to Rome many times. But he has not had a chance to explore the Italian capital at leisure, since he has always been tied up in meetings there.

All that is set to change: Dr Kwok, 58, is retiring at the end of the year, leaving the National Heritage Board (NHB) after 17 years. He is planning to spend at least a month each in cities such as Rome, San Francisco and Istanbul, all with rich historical and cultural past. He also plans to pick up Latin so he can finally read the inscriptions on Roman monuments.

He says: "I've never really had enough time to get under the skin of these places." Although he leaves his job only at the end of the year, an international search for his successor has begun.

The NHB is looking for someone who can continue the work done by him and further raise the international profile of the museum through regular blockbuster exhibitions and more state-of-the-art galleries. Dr Kwok, who was trained as an architect, looks to be a hard act to follow.

He has opened three museums - the Asian Civilisations Museum in Armenian Street in 1997, then a branch of the museum at Empress Place in 2003. The museum in Armenian Street closed its doors on Dec. 31, 2005, but he later converted it into the Peranakan Museum, which opened last month.

Professor Tommy Koh, who chairs the heritage board, says: "We owe Dr Kenson Kwok a big debt of gratitude. He is the loving father of the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum."

"Through these museums, and because of his curatorial expertise and global network of friends and admirers, he has helped to place Singapore on the museum map of the world."

With all three museums, aside from converting heritage buildings into conducive spaces to display priceless art, he also had to start the collections for them.

As Dr Gauri Parmoo Krishnan, 44, senior curator for South Asia and research at the ACM, points out: "Many things which you see at the ACM today are things we discussed when the name ACM didn't even exist."

"It was a time when we were housed in a container. Even then, Dr Kwok had so many ideas for the museum. Today when you walk through our museum, it is sometimes hard to believe how far we have come. His vision really helped make the museum what it is today."

Each year, at least 500,000 people visit the ACM. And some of its blockbuster exhibitions have drawn record numbers. Alankar: 5000 Year Of India, held in 1994, attracted 162,000 visitors - the largest number ever recorded for any museum exhibition in Singapore.

Eternal Egypt: Treasures From The British Museum, in 1999, drew 102,000 visitors, while Journey Of Faith: Art And History From The Vatican Collections attracted over 133,000 visitors in 2005.

He tells Life that he decided to take a permanent break from what he calls "intensely relentless" 12- to 15-hour work days be-

cause of what some of his friends are going through. "Some were falling sick, others were dealing with medical conditions, some even passed away. It made me realise life was passing by too quickly."

Unlike his friends, he hasn't planned his retirement carefully. "A lot of them started spending extra time at the golf course and planned their finances. I haven't done anything of that sort," he admits.

MUSEUMS ARE IN HIS BLOOD



BIDDING FAREWELL: Like this sculpture of a girl waving goodbye at the Peranakan Museum, museum director Dr Kwok is doing the same after spending 17 years at the National Heritage Board.

Dr Kwok on...

Why he's retiring:
'I really feel I've neglected my family and friends. It is a miracle that I still have some friends left'

Life at the museum:
'It has been a sprint to the finish'

Apart from this, ACM's growing international reputation has been reflected in the interest in its collection. It has been lending to other museums in Sydney, Adelaide, Canberra, Kuala Lumpur and Manila.

Having positioned the museum internationally, Dr Kwok says he feels it's time to retire.

Apart from travelling and learning Latin, the bachelor also plans to take up yoga, spend more time with his family and friends, and "buy an old house in another country and do it up".

He tells Life that he decided to take a permanent break from what he calls "intensely relentless" 12- to 15-hour work days be-



PLENTY OF ART: Outfits on display (above) at the Peranakan Museum. Dr Kwok's vision for the museums under his charge also led to blockbuster exhibitions which featured, among other things, Vatican (left) and Egyptian (right) artefacts.

cause of what some of his friends are going through. "Some were falling sick, others were dealing with medical conditions, some even passed away. It made me realise life was passing by too quickly."

Unlike his friends, he hasn't planned his retirement carefully. "A lot of them started spending extra time at the golf course and planned their finances. I haven't done anything of that sort," he admits.

More museums, please
HE DOES plan to spend more time visiting museums and galleries, though.

He says he was drawn to museums from a very early age and he has his teachers to thank for this. "I had a wonderful succession of art masters in school who would encourage us to visit the museum and commercial galleries."

He was born in Sydney, Australia, as his banker father was posted to work there. The family also lived in Penang before moving back to Singapore when he was five.

At age 15, he returned to Sydney and enrolled in Chatswood School, a boarding school. It was there that he started spending more and more time in museums such as The Art Gallery of New South Wales and many commercial galleries in Sydney.

Even when he came back to Singapore on holidays, his first stop would be the National Museum.

But he chose to study architecture instead. When I was seven or eight, I used to make model houses out of cardboard. Every time my parents' friends saw them, they would say I would become an architect. It must have stuck in my mind."

After getting a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Sydney in 1971, he pursued a doctorate in environmental psychology at University College London. When he returned in 1983, he joined the systems and research department at the Housing Board.

"It was a perfect job," he says. "I could apply all my research techniques."

But his interest in the arts continued and he joined the South East Asian Ceramics Society and went on to become its president. In 1991, he helped organise an exhibition of ceramics from the Han period at the National Museum.

"I was dealing with the museum very closely and found out that it was looking for people. I sort of fell into the job and my hobby soon turned into a profession."

He joined the National Museum as a senior curator in 1992. He was appointed deputy director of the ACM in 1994 and became its director later that year.

He is quick to credit others for the success of ACM's blockbuster exhibitions, but those who know him say it is his ability to connect with people that has helped the museum gain the standing it has today.

Dr Krishnan says: "He was visiting the Indian state of Gujarat last year and what struck me most was the fact that he immersed himself totally in the culture there."

"Even though he could afford it, he didn't hire an air-conditioned car to see the place. He would take the bus in Delhi."

Dr Kwok also says he plans to continue his museum work, albeit in a different role. He says he is in discussions with the NHB to continue in an advisory capacity.

He says: "Museums are in my blood. Unless I go for a transfusion, they would stay a part of me."

But before that, there's Rome, Istanbul, San Francisco to explore.