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HERITAGE

Watch the National Museum 'speak' to the people

Its grand 120th anniversary celebrations will bring history alive, writes **WEI-TZE SAM**

MOST of us recall going to history museums in our youth and passively absorbing a lot of stuff – historical facts, details and stories such as what our ancestors did and how they lived. But museums aren't just educational institutions anymore, nor are they simply storage places for precious artefacts.

At least not the way National Museum director Lee Chor Lin defines them.

"While the museum is fundamentally an educational institution, it's also a platform for local artistic expression that aims to create a 'national narrative'," she says.

This year, as the National Museum marks its 120th anniversary, it is organising an eclectic programme of performances, exhibitions, films and other activities to celebrate not only its own history, but also the history of a people and a nation.

As Tan Boon Hui, deputy director and festival programmer, puts it, the anniversary celebrations are all about "making the museum speak to people", to write "the history of the future". He adds: "We do this because history must have meaning for those of us who live in the present."

Founded on Oct 12, 1887, the National Museum positions itself as "Singapore's oldest museum with the youngest and most innovative soul". Since its radical renovation last year, the museum has reached visitor levels of 50,000-60,000 a month, a figure which is expected to rise still further.



The way we were:
A 1960s 'pasar malam' will be re-created in the museum's Stamford Garden on Sept 7

The programme for the 120th anniversary celebrations has thus been curated to reflect the museum as the centre of social and cultural life, as indeed it was in the colonial era. In this spirit, the four-month-long celebration takes off on Sept 7 with a free outdoor event: a re-creation of the old *pasar malam* (outdoor night market) in the museum's Stamford Garden. At the same time, *Homemade 2007* celebrates local talent with bands playing an anthology of locally produced music.

The Prince of Gowns, the opening exhibit, is a selection of evening taffeta gowns from one of Singapore's most talented designers,

Benny Ong. Ong donated 38 gowns to the museum, 10 of which have been put on display for the first time.

Also to go on display is the much-awaited *Empire of Nature*, a complete showcase of the 477 natural history drawings commissioned by William Farquhar (first British resident and commandant of Singapore) and executed by Chinese craftsmen.

A key event is TheatreWorks' *120*, Singapore's largest ever local theatre production directed by Ong Keng Sen and featuring performers such as Hossan Leong, Kumar and Irene Ang, who take people on a dramatic tour around the museum to engage creatively with the past.

Mr Tan says that this focus on expressing Asian sentiments is necessary for Singapore to find its place in the international art world. The anniversary celebrations provide "a vibrant new context to history and familiar traditions", as the museum evolves in people's minds over 120 years from a mere repository of objects to a site for the creation of human emotions and experiences.

For the complete schedule of performances, exhibitions, films and activities, please visit www.nationalmuseum.sg or pick up a 120th anniversary programme booklet at the National Museum visitor centre