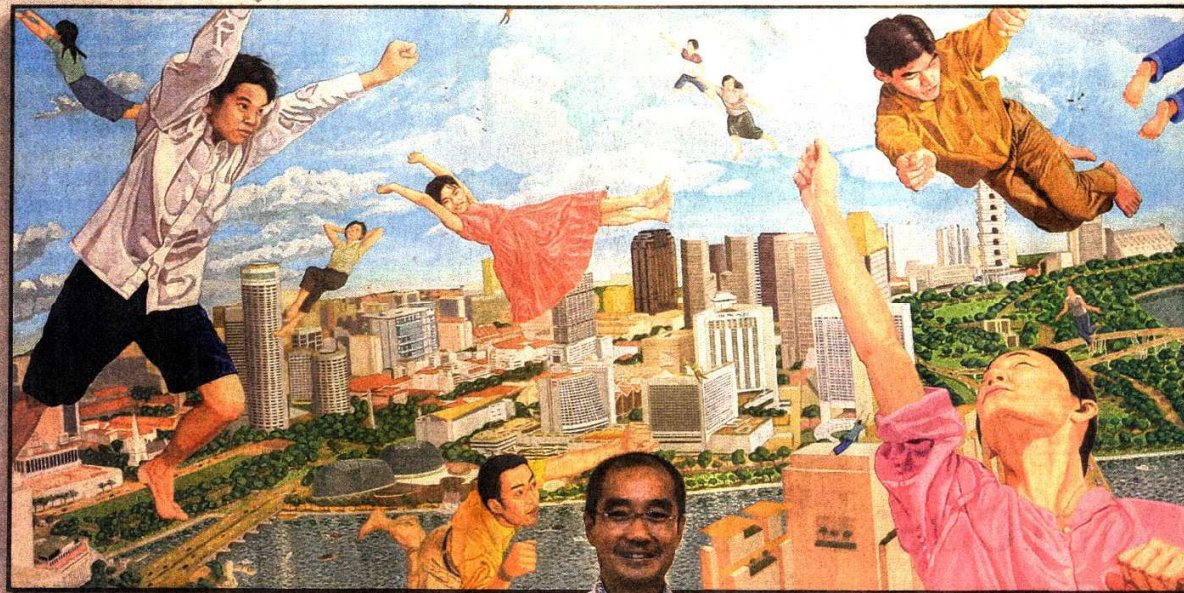




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Michael Koh is floating new ideas to turn museums into lifestyle destinations and shed their image as dull, serious places.

**ADELINE CHIA** talks to the CEO of the National Heritage Board.

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# Michael learns to rock

Reaching for the skies: National Heritage Board chief Michael Koh in front of Vibrant Youth, a painting by Singaporean Wong Shih Yow.

# Breathing life into museums

Museums are getting exciting under the National Heritage Board's new CEO Michael Koh



Adeline Chia  
ARTS REPORTER

SOMETHING is happening in Singapore museums. Heartlanders are making the rounds of them in sponsored tours. Museums feature prominently in a children's book. And if you look carefully at the TV suspense drama *Metamorphosis* on Channel 8, you'll see footage of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in the background.

And in December, taxi drivers will be invited to attend museum open houses so they can be better guides to their passengers.

The man behind all these initiatives is Mr Michael Koh, the chief executive officer of the National Heritage Board (NHB).

Since he hopped on board a little over a year ago, the 46-year-old architect by training has introduced some snazzy changes to the NHB, the statutory board that runs nine museums and heritage centres in Singapore.

Under his charge are: the ACM, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the National Museum, the Singapore Philatelic Museum, Reflections at Bukit Chandu, the Heritage Conservation Centre, the National Archives of Singapore, Memories at the Old Ford Factory and the Peranakan Museum.

In September last year, he left the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), where he had worked for more than 10 years on and off, to join the NHB.

He is the third and youngest CEO to join the board since it was set up in 1993. His predecessors were Mrs Lim Siok Pen and, before her, Mr Lim Siam Kim.

The charismatic Mr Koh, an architecture graduate from the National University of Singapore, was a star city planner.

His first job was with the URA as a planner in 1990, and he rose through the ranks to be-

come director.

In 1992, the authorities gave him a scholarship to pursue a master's in design studies at Harvard University.

In 2002, he left URA for a brief stint in Temasek Holdings and its subsidiary, Mapletree Holdings. He returned to URA in 2003, where he was director of urban planning and design.

And last year, he made the leap from city planning to the heritage sector.

At the Olio Dome Cafe at SAM on Monday, he tells Life! that it was not an easy decision.

After NHB chairman Professor Tommy Koh sounded him out, he went through "months of angst and soul-searching" before he took the plunge.

He says: "Most people probably thought that I was very daring to make the move. I wanted something different, and I saw a lot of opportunity in NHB. It's already a brand, but it needs to be refreshed, rejuvenated and reinvented."

Besides, the father of two - he has been married to housewife Lim Chiwen for 15 years and they have a daughter, seven, and son, six - says that he always had an interest in art and in collecting.

When he was a child, he collected and assembled models of houses and toy cars. Now, he collects Singaporean and Vietnamese art.

## Sweeping changes

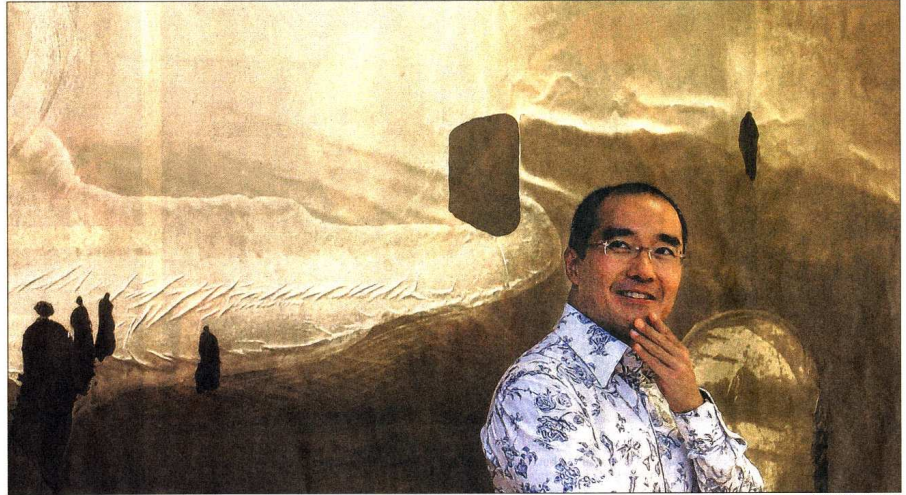
THIRTEEN months on the job, and the changes are significant.

For one thing, the NHB's new annual report, covered in blue velvet and sporting the chic title *Muse In Vogue* (right), is decidedly more plush than last year's standard government publication.

Just last month, fresh showbiz faces joined NHB as board members, including actor Qi Yuwu and MediaCorp Raintree Pictures managing director Daniel Yau.

On whether this could dumb down the heritage and culture sector in Singapore for mass appeal, Mr Koh says: "We want to engage the creative industries and grab a bigger audience. It's not just because of star quality."

He adds: "When people saw Yuwu on the list, they were shocked at first. But he is a seri-



ST PHOTO: ALAN LIM

BRINGING NEW TO OLD: The bold moves of National Heritage Board CEO Michael Koh jazzed up the museums under his charge.

ous collector of Chinese contemporary art and knows some Chinese artists personally."

And he stresses that rigorous scholarship and curation should form the backbone of exhibitions.

He says: "We can't be seen as lowering the quality of exhibitions, which must be rooted in scholarship and research. It is only in the manner of presentation that we need to change, and which we have to tailor to different audiences."

## Conclusion: It works

HIS unconventional methods might raise some eyebrows, but they work. Qi's popular tour of SAM's exhibition of the Chinese painter Zeng Fanzhi brought in about 100 fans, some of whom were museum first-timers.

Mr Koh is also working hard to attract visitors from "emerging communities" such as heartlanders and children. For this, he has worked with the People's Association to bring families from community centres on free bus trips to museums.

And to educate and entice more taxi drivers, whom he calls "ambassadors of our museums", he is organising an open house for them in December, where they will be led on guided tours and get vouchers for free entry.

The man is also known to add a personal touch to his work.

Because of him, the Sasha children's books series now has a *Sasha Visits The Museums* (left) book that was launched in August.

While reading to his daughter one night, he thought: "There's *Sasha Visits The Botanic Gardens*, *Sasha Visits The Zoo*, but *Sasha* never went to the museums."

So he mooted the idea of the book, and author Shamini Flint wrote it in a tie-up between the NHB and her publishing company Sunbear Publishing.

He also emceed the inaugural Patron of Heritage Awards this year to personally thank the benefactors who had donated and loaned some \$118.5 million worth of artefacts between April 2004 and December last year.

Socialising with patrons and donors has meant a lot more late nights for the busy man. He says: "In the past, you could just take your work home. Now there is socialising and events at night. And you still take your work

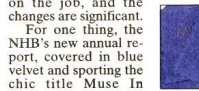


PHOTO: THE NEW PAPER

DRAWING A RESPONSE: Don't dismiss Qi Yuwu's (right) joining the National Heritage Board as a board member. He is a serious collector of contemporary Chinese art.



## Coming up

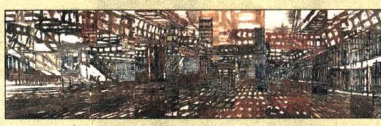
HERE are some activities and events that visitors can look forward to at museums in the next few months:

### Discovering Local Herbs And Spices: A Mortar And Pestle Master Class

Next Thursday, National Museum of Singapore, 6.30 to 8pm, \$40, book online at [www.nationalmuseum.sg](http://www.nationalmuseum.sg)

This class takes its inspiration from *Empire Of Nature*, an ongoing exhibition of drawings of flora and fauna commissioned by William Farquhar.

Participants will learn about the herbs and spices featured in the collection, and see how popular pastes are prepared using mortar and pestle. There will also be a demonstration of



how these pastes can be used in various local dishes.

Bonus: You get to taste the food afterwards too.

### The Big Picture Show

Oct 30 to March 23, Singapore Art Museum, \$8 for adults and \$4 for students and senior citizens

This show features more than 20 large-scale paintings - most more than 3m long - by Asian artists, including works by 2000 Young Artist Award win-

ner Hong Sek Chern (above) and local painter Wong Keen.

### Vietnam Festival 2008

April to October, various museums

Vietnamese madness will hit the museums next year. Events include a Vietnamese film festival at the National Museum and a Vietnam art show at the Singapore Art Museum featuring Vietnamese art in the last three decades.

More details will be released in the coming months.