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Headline: Seeing old things with new eyes

Seeing old things with new eyes

National Museum director tells **PARVATHI NAYAR** about its new directions

IT IS a dramatic turnaround. Before Dec 8, 2006 — before its three-year, \$132.6 million makeover — the 119-year-old National Museum had perhaps 3,000 visitors a month. After the big bang opening to the Singaporean public with a \$2 million festival, the museum has had about 2,500 curious visitors a day.

But now the opening festivities are over and the museum is settling in for the long haul. The big question that needs to be asked is this: what will the museum contribute to the cultural landscape of Singapore?

A sense of history, is the short answer.

The National Museum's director Lee Chor Lin elaborates that the museum has updated the notion of "history" from a fuddy-duddy collection of dates and names consigned to textbooks, to an alive-and-kicking, interactive part of the human story.

Ms Lee explains: "Our philosophy of history is that it is always in the making, and part of the present. We are dealing with history from a contemporary perspective.

"It was only in the 80s that a Singaporean history component was added to the National Museum, and an acquisition budget and gallery space devoted to it. In the whole scheme of museum redevelopment, there was a concern that younger people, especially, were getting alienated from history.

"Hence one of our objectives is to present the history of Singapore in an engaging way and in a global context. Through multiple prongs such as exhibitions, activities, films and performances, we suggest history is a way of looking at events from multiple perspectives — and



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our audiences are left to form their own opinion of historical 'facts'."

On one level, this is achieved through the permanent exhibits in the four Living Galleries devoted to food, film, photography and fashion; as well as the Singapore History Gallery where visitors can quite literally choose their "path" through national events and personal stories — with the help of an audio guide — to navigate the events leading to the founding of modern Singapore.

But beyond this, the museum's strategy — hinted at in the programming of the Opening Festival — is that every performance and exhibition presented will help us

connect back to history, both ours and the world's. The international perspective is necessary; we cannot live in an atmosphere of exclusion, and need to derive new meanings and knowledge from other people's cultures and forms of expression.

By seeing "old" things with "new" eyes, our historical and traditional heritages become a relevant component of our modern life.

The National Museum, 93 Stamford Road; opening hours: 10am to 6pm daily; admission: \$10/\$5 (concessions) for Singapore History Gallery and Living Galleries



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