

Publication: South China Morning Post

Date: Mar 11 2007

Headline: The colour of money

When descendants of migrant Chinese made it good in Malaya and Singapore, they splashed out on the finer things in life, writes **Sonia Kolesnikov-Jacobs**

The colour of money

CHINESE MIGRANTS have left their cultural imprint throughout the world over the centuries, spreading not only their religious practices and culinary skills but also their artistic tastes.

In peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, the integration of Chinese migrants with the local population was so complete that they created a new culture with its own identity: the Straits Chinese Peranakan.

The Peranakan Legacy, an exhibition at the Ayala Museum in Manila, explores the material culture of these descendants of Chinese migrants. It's part of a bigger, six-part show at the museum that examines the contribution of the Chinese diaspora to the art and culture of Southeast Asia.

"The Peranakan culture is the product of a syncretism that drew from the traditions of both China and Southeast Asia," says curator David Alan Henkel of Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), which lent the artefacts. "While motifs remained largely Chinese, colour schemes and fashions were often drawn from local inspirations."

The ACM collection – mainly embroideries, textiles, porcelain, silver, beadwork and jewellery – was on display in Singapore until the small museum closed at the end of 2005 to become a dedicated Peranakan culture museum. "The loan is especially timely as several star pieces from the collection have been made available for the show at the Ayala Museum," says ACM director Kenyon Kwok. These include an elaborate gold peacock belt with a diamond inlaid buckle and side panels, a large *kamcheng* (a type of covered container) and a rare pair of intricately carved ceremonial oil lamps used on altars.

The Straits Chinese Peranakans descended from Chinese immigrants who moved to Malacca, on the Malay Peninsula, in the 15th century, having been encouraged by the key role the port city was playing in Chinese trade routes. They spread throughout the British Straits Settlements of Singapore and Penang, often acting as intermediaries between British and Chinese traders. By the mid-19th century many of the Babas and Nyonyas (Peranakan men and wom-

en) amassed great wealth, allowing them to live in style, commission elaborate jewellery, and import specially commissioned porcelain from around Shanghai called Nyonyaware.

"Nyonyaware is a great example of what grew out of the Peranakan culture," Henkel says. "They commissioned different things from what you'd have regularly found in China. While the techniques used are the same, the colours and dense use of motifs are different – more in line with Peranakan taste."

Nyonyaware differed from traditional porcelain in its decorative designs and shapes. In *Straits Chinese Porcelain: A Collector's Guide*, Ho Wing Meng says that, whereas mainland Chinese utensils tend to be sparsely ornamented and lightly painted in pale washes of enamels, Nyonyaware is characterised by decorative motifs and vivid enamelled tints on a painted background. Many pieces are decorated with phoenixes and tree peonies and borders of Buddhist or Taoist symbols.

Henkel says a unique expression of Peranakan art and aesthetics can be found in beadwork and embroidery, because it was produced by members of the community rather than bought or commissioned from outside craftspeople.

Nyonyas devoted much time and effort to both crafts, partly because the eligibility of an unmarried woman could hinge on the quality of her handiwork. Ideally, a young Nyonya would be expected to produce a complete set of accessories for herself and her groom, as well as decorations for the bridal chamber, using only the finest, most expensive materials they could afford, such as imported glass beads from southern Europe. Examples of bed hangings, slippers and decorative panels with distinctive beadwork are on show.



"Some families owed their survival to the jewellery built up by previous generations"

David Alan Henkel ACM curator



Indian and European jewellers, which led to the incorporation of many forms and motifs and the use of a diverse range of techniques. Peranakans reputedly preferred their jewellers to work in their homes so they could keep a close eye on the raw materials.

"Although the jewellery could be quite similar to what the native Malay population wore, you would also see auspicious Chinese symbols and mystical animals like chimera," Henkel says.

The most distinctive form of Peranakan jewellery is the *kerosang*, or brooch, a standard fastener for blouses. The earliest form was the *kerosang Melaka*, which consists of a large *ibu* (mother brooch) and two smaller *anak* (child brooches), worn with the *ibu* in the middle and the *anak* pinned above and below.

The *kerosang serong*, from Penang, is a paisley-like *ibu* worn at the neck with two *anak* below. Changing fashions saw the gradual downsizing of *kerosang* as lighter brooches were needed to be worn with the lighter, more delicate sheer voile and lace *kebaya* (blouse) popular from the 1930s onwards. Often these lightweight *kerosang* were joined with chains and are called *kerosang rantay*.

Although most of the artefacts in the exhibition date from the 19th century, Peranakan culture is still alive. Many of the traditions and practices are in danger of dying out, but there are attempts to revive traditional crafts, especially beading and embroideries of *kebaya*.

The Peranakan Legacy, Ayala Museum, Manila. Ends May 27

Peranakan ceramics were more vividly coloured than their mainland equivalents, and ornamentation on items such as buckles (top left) and oil lamps (below) often incorporated Malay forms

