

MEDIA RELEASE

NEW SINGAPORE RIVER GALLERY OPENS AT ASIAN CIVILISATION MUSEUM



Singapore, 18 November 2017 - Explore the wonders of the Singapore River and discover how the humble river was Singapore's lifeline for almost 200 years at the newly opened Singapore River Gallery. Through the collections and narratives, catch a glimpse of the early days of Singapore's trade explosion and how the historical landmark developed over the years. The Singapore River Gallery will open on 18th November, with opening hours from 8:30am to 7pm daily.

The Singapore River is a modest river in comparison to the Chao Praya, Mekong, or Yangtze Rivers. It flows less than four kilometres from its source near Fort Canning Hill to the sea, but has long been an important waterway. Blessed with a well-sheltered estuary, a naturally deep harbour, and a freshwater spring on its banks, this river was once the main trade artery and life-blood of Singapore.

As the only museum situated along the iconic Singapore River, the Asian Civilisations Museum is a great starting point for the Singapore River Walk, which traces the development of the Singapore River spanning from Collyer Quay to Robertson Quay.

Since 1819, when modern Singapore was founded, the Singapore River has served as an artery of international commerce that drew people from all over the region to work, trade and seek their fortunes on this island. Today, after a major clean-up that ended in 1983, the river continues to bustle with life, flowing past modern skyscrapers and historic buildings.

ACM's Trade narrative and collections

A Harbour of History: The Singapore River Through Time provides an overview of the Singapore River, from the 14th-century *Temasek* to present day Singapore:

- **TEMASEK:** The Singapore River was the centre of a 14th-century kingdom called *Temasek* (later called "*Singapura*"). *Temasek* was an important port mentioned in early Chinese, Javanese, and Vietnamese records.

According to the *Malay Annals (Sejarah Melayu)*, a 16th-century chronicle, *Singapura* was established by a renegade prince from the kingdom of *Srivijaya*. Centred in Sumatra, *Srivijaya* was the maritime power of the region from around the 7th to 11th century.

While hunting near the north bank of the Singapore River, Prince Sri Tri Buana saw a powerful and majestic beast. The creature was identified to be a *singa* ("lion" in Sanskrit). Interpreting this encounter as a good omen, he established his kingdom there and named it *Singapura* - "Lion City". (The creature was more likely a tiger, as lions are not native to the island or the region).

In the early 1820s, an ancient inscription was discovered on a large stone on the mouth of the Singapore River. Dubbed the Singapore Stone, it was located where the Fullerton Hotel sits today. Scholars are unsure of the origins of the script, and have never been able to decipher it.

Regrettably, the stone was blown up by engineers expanding fortifications at the mouth of the river in 1843. A fragment of the stone is displayed at the National Museum of Singapore.

- **EARLY PORT:** By the 15th century, a densely inhabited town and busy port had developed along the Singapore River.

Archaeological excavations show that a wide range of goods were traded here, including ceramics from China and local products from around the region.

- But as European powers gained control of nearby ports, including Malacca and Batavia (Jakarta) in the 16th century, Singapore fell into a period of decline. Through the 17th and 18th centuries, the site seemed to have been little more than a fishing village.

The fishing hooks, shells, animal bones, and coins found by the archaeologists working near this building offer a glimpse into the lives of the 14th-century inhabitants who lived and worked near the river. The abundance of ceramic shards, including expensive imported porcelain from China, hints at the prosperity of the settlement in its heyday.

- **COLONIAL OUTPOST:** In 1819, an agent of the British East India Company named Thomas Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore. His goal was to establish a new port for the British. They hoped to break the Dutch stranglehold on trade in the region.

Raffles signed a treaty on 6 February 1819 with Tengku Hussein, a disaffected prince from the Riau Sultanate who had been passed over for the crown in favour of his younger brother. This date is often used to mark the beginning of the modern history of the island.

The British established the city as a free port, charging no duties or taxes. This made it popular, and trade quickly boomed. Traders and migrants from around the world arrived and settled along the river's banks. They built piers, quays, warehouses, and factories, which quickly outgrew the confines of the river. Around 1850, a new port to the west (today's Keppel Harbour) was established for larger ships. But the Singapore River continued to serve as a port for another century.

- **BOOMING COMMERCIAL HUB:** A visitor to the river during its heyday would have seen hundreds of vessels jostling for space along the banks. Smaller boats called "twakows", "lighters", or "bumboats" transferred goods from the large cargo ships anchored in the harbour to piers and quays along the river. Small armies of coolies and dockworkers toiled to unload goods into riverside warehouses known as "godowns" (Malay: *gudang*, for "warehouse" or "storeroom").

The north bank of the river became the choice location for commerce. Raffles Place and Fullerton Square emerged as centres providing merchants and bankers large and small with meeting places to exchange news and seize fresh business opportunities.

Government buildings dominated the south bank. This building, which today houses the Asian Civilisations Museum, was completed in 1867. It housed public agencies, including the Public Works Department and Legislative Council, and was known for years as Government Offices.

- **THE BIG CLEAN-UP:** The commerce that dominated the river came with an environmental cost. Pollution, silting, and overcrowding affected both navigation and public health.

After independence in 1965, Singapore took ambitious steps to develop its economy. Modern port facilities were built away from the city centre. These facilities were far more efficient than the antiquated quays and godowns of the Singapore River.

The government also sought to transform the city centre into a modern metropolis by investing in redevelopment around the river. The Ministry of Environment's Clean River Project (1977-87) spearheaded renovations and redevelopment. Shipping was relocated, and the dilapidated docks, godowns, and shophouses along the river banks were renovated, re-purposed, or demolished to make way for new developments.

- **A RIVER TRANSFORMED:** By the turn of the 21st century, the Singapore River and its environs had been transformed. Today the river flows past modern skyscrapers as well as monuments from Singapore's past. Historic bridges have been restored and new pedestrian bridges, such as the colourful Alkaff Bridge near Robertson Quay, built.

Today, the Singapore River no longer empties into the open sea, but rather into Marina Bay, an estuary formed by reclamation works in the 1970s. In 2008, the Marina Barrage was completed, transforming the bay into a freshwater reservoir.

Scenes of the river jammed with boats, coolies hard at work, the riverbanks piled high with cargo - these are but memories today. But many of the old landmarks have survived as shops, restaurants, galleries, and hotels to serve new generations. Completely transformed, the river continues to play a vital role in the lives of Singaporeans.

The gallery complements the Trade narrative of the Asian Civilisations Museum, which focuses on Singapore's nature as a cosmopolitan, multicultural, multi-religious port and trading city. The museum fosters understanding of the diverse heritage cultures of Singapore, their interconnections, and connections with the world. Galleries are organised thematically rather than by geographical region, with an emphasis on networks and flows rather than borders and boundaries.

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About the Asian Civilisations Museum

The Asian Civilisations Museum is devoted to exploring the rich artistic heritage of Asia, especially the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans. Opened in 1997 and in its present building by the Singapore River since 2003, the museum traces its roots to the Raffles Museum, founded in the middle of the 19th century. ACM focuses on the many historical connections between the cultures of Asia, and between Asia and the world. Singapore's history as a port city that brought people together from all over the world is used as a means of examining the history of Asia. Special exhibitions bring magnificent objects from around the world to our Singapore audience. Programmes like the annual ACM After Dark, Saturdays@ACM, and Lunchtime Concerts encourage visitors to connect more closely with the culture and the arts. For more information, visit www.acm.org.sg.

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