

MUSETalk with  
Professor Tommy Koh, Chairman  
of the National Heritage Board

# a very happy journey

BY MARCUS NG



“It has been a very happy journey.”

Summing up the past nine years, Professor Tommy Koh expresses great pleasure at having led the National Heritage Board (NHB) for nearly a decade. Since assuming the chair of the NHB in August 2002, Professor Koh has overseen a major transformation of the country's museum scene. New museums, heritage centres and festivals have emerged to add breadth and depth to the once-derided notion that Singapore has a history worth telling or museums worth visiting. Residents as well as tourists now throng the NHB's family of museums, interpretative centres and festivals in numbers that were unthinkable a mere decade ago.

But, at the heart of it all, Professor Koh maintains that vision, energy and a committed and talented team are critical factors that drive the future of an organisation such as the NHB. “I have realised that what makes a museum great is not just its collection or infrastructure,” he stated, “It's the people.”

Currently Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large, Special Adviser to the Institute of Policy Studies, Chairman of the Centre for International Law, Rector of Tembusu College, NUS, and Chairman of the SymAsia Foundation of Credit Suisse, Professor

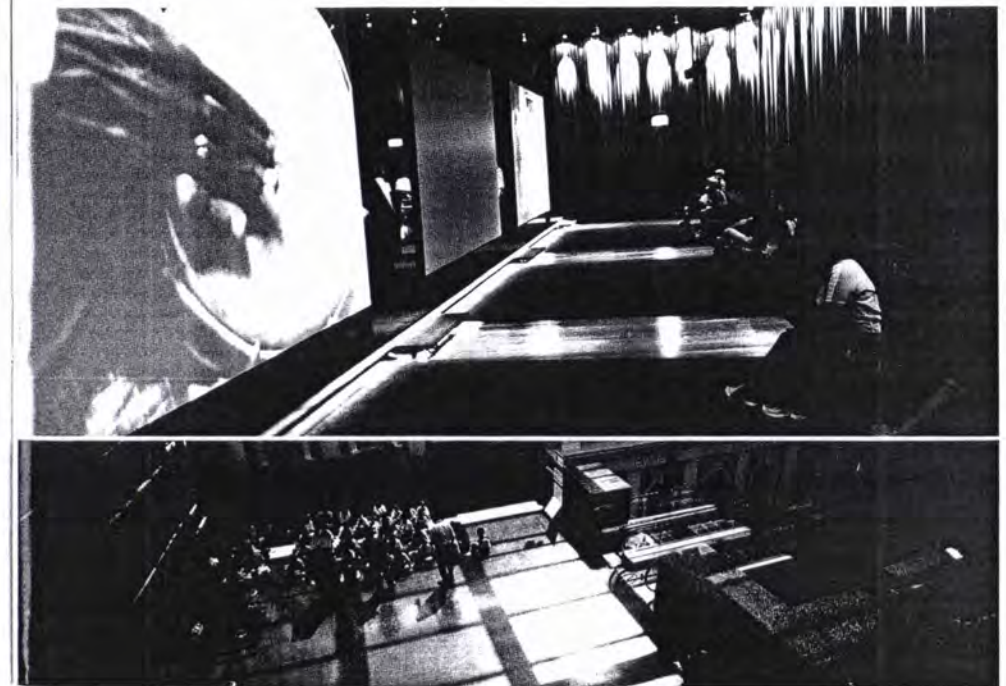
Koh offers a glimpse into his own dip into the world of arts and heritage. Revealing that his father, Koh Han Kok (1910 - 1985) was a great reader, he mused, “From him I developed a love for reading and literature.” His mother, Tsai Ying, was “an unusual woman of her time, because she was an actress and a dancer,” he added. “When I was growing up, I met many actors, actresses, dancers and visual artists. It was from her that I developed a love for the visual and performing arts.”

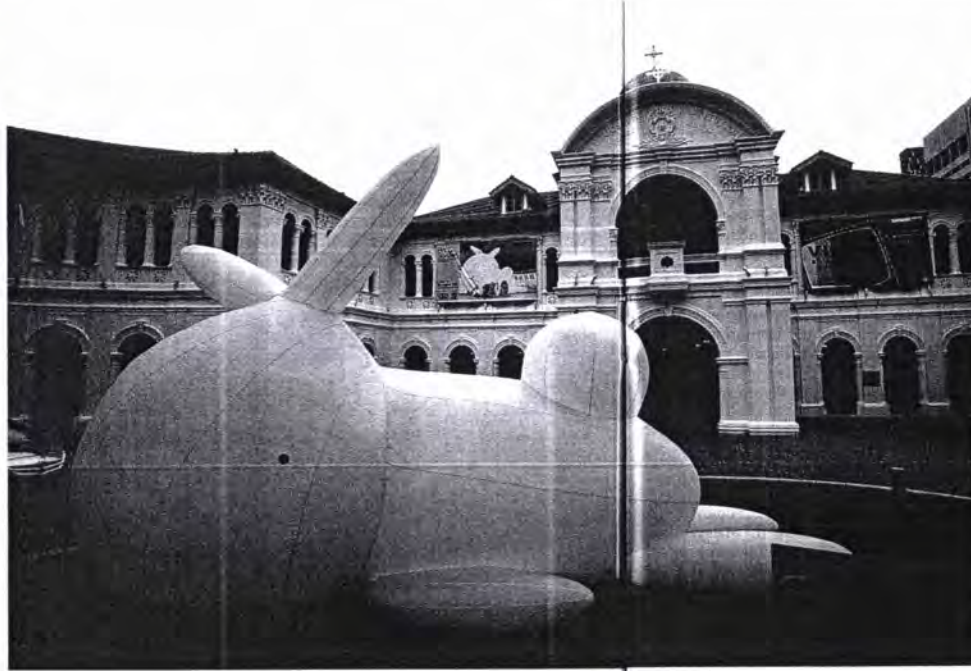
A twist of fate later started what would be a lifelong affair with Singapore visual art. “I only collect Singapore artists since I don't have much money,” recalled Professor Koh, half in jest. His very first art purchase, made soon after he began working in 1962, was a painting by Wee Beng Chong (who won the first Cultural Medallion in 1979). Recounting the circumstances behind the buy, Professor Koh said he had attended an exhibition to raise funds for the artist's studies in Paris. “Each of us bought one painting,” he recounted. “Wee has developed so much from his student days that he probably thinks the painting I bought is naive! But people like it and my wife and I have lived with it through our marriage and in our many homes, here and abroad.”

A lifelong career in international relations has also enabled Professor Koh, who co-chairs Singapore's bilateral dialogues with China, Japan and India, to introduce visitors from abroad to Singapore's museums and cultural institutions. “I have been opportunistic in riding on other work that I do with foreign friends,” he remarked on his habit of weaving in a visit to a Singapore museum during many bilateral meetings. “My friends would say, ‘Oh, I didn't realise there were such wonderful museums in Singapore!’” He also recalled with satisfaction that the opening dinner for the Asia-Middle East Dialogue in 2005 was held at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

#### BUILDING REGIONAL TIES THROUGH TOURS, THEMATIC FESTIVALS AND TRAINING

Going further, Professor Koh also initiated a series of exploratory tours to fellow ASEAN nations for NHB curators and managers. “Initially, I didn't receive much enthusiasm, as Singaporeans would rather go west,” he recounted. “But my strategic vision was that our strength lies in our own region and we should not just tell our own story but tell the region's stories.” By visiting all nine ASEAN countries, he paved





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the way to an era of active dialogue and mutual learning between Singapore and the region's museum community via the ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium, which was first held in 2007 and is now a biennial event. "That was my dream, that we would be well-connected with our region and we would help project the region's cultural power to the world," Professor Koh declared.

One happy by-product of these links is a regular series of country-themed festivals that involves the entire NHB family. "During our tours we met many museum leaders and collectors and when we said that we would like their support to mount a museum-wide festival, this was met with great enthusiasm," shared Professor Koh. "Kick off with a Vietnam Festival in 2008, the NHB has since celebrated the heritage and cultures of the Philippines and Indonesia in two subsequent festivals. "Next year will be Thailand," he revealed, "And in the coming years I hope we will have festivals on Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos and Brunei."

Ever the diplomat, Professor Koh noted that the festivals are NHB's way of telling Singapore's ASEAN partners "that we are members of the same family and we would

like to work with you to showcase your history, heritage and culture. I think they appreciate that."

In 2010, the NHB founded the NHB Academy to provide specialist training to museum professionals and serve as a centre of excellence for museum scholarship and research. "I come from an academic background. Therefore, I have always attached great importance to developing intellectual capital," said Professor Koh. Pointing out the need to attract good people and develop a learning culture in NHB, he said, "One of the reasons we founded the Academy was not only to train ourselves and upgrade our knowledge but also to help our neighbours."

"That's my vision, that we could be the intellectual hub of the region, not just in museology but also in scholarship." Another academic thrust Professor Koh hopes to develop is the rewarding of NHB colleagues who publish good articles, monographs or books in their fields of specialisation.

#### THE VALUE OF HISTORY

There is a practical side to Professor Koh's efforts to raise local awareness of regional cultures through the museums. He cited

the case of a Singapore company which acquired a plot of land in Hanoi, Vietnam, that housed a prison. "They were given permission to demolish the prison and redevelop the site," retold Professor Koh. "But because they didn't know enough about the history of their host country, they weren't aware that to the Vietnamese war veterans, this was a sacred site." Popularly known as the Hanoi Hilton, the prison was where the French had incarcerated early Vietnamese nationalist leaders in the colonial era. "Some of them lost their lives in that prison," he added. "And, during the Vietnam War, this was where American prisoners-of-war, including Senator John McCain, were imprisoned."

As a result, the developers were puzzled by a public backlash to their plans. "If they had a deeper understanding of the history of the country, they would have realised that they must accommodate the sentiments of the local people," said Professor Koh. "So in the end, they kept part of the prison, which is now a museum."

Such accounts reinforce Professor Koh's conviction that a better understanding of history is crucial to Singapore and Singaporeans. "That story inspired me to

find an enjoyable way, by using our museums, to help Singaporeans who travel and work abroad understand our neighbours' history and culture."

Other tangible signs of Singapore's ties to the world at large can be seen by the Singapore River in a series of NHB markers dedicated to foreign friends to our shores. Sharing the story that led to the first plaque to the Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski in 2004, Professor Koh said, "We must give credit to our former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for that. The President of Poland was coming to Singapore, so Mr Goh was wondering if there was anything we could ask him to unveil or launch, something that is a link between Singapore and Poland."

The son of a Polish nobleman, who became a merchant seaman and visited Singapore numerous times in the 1880s, Conrad drew upon his adventures in Southeast Asia to write stories that helped establish the region in European imagination. The suggestion was accepted with delight by the Polish Embassy and, according to Professor Koh, "whenever a Polish leader visits Singapore, he always makes it a point to go to the marker and put flowers there." Jose

Rizal, Ho Chi Minh and Deng Xiaoping were honoured in subsequent years. "The next one will be Nehru," revealed Professor Koh, noting that such gestures evoke very powerful sentiments in countries which place a premium on their national heroes. "We must connect with others with our heads as well as with our hearts."

#### MAKING MUSEUMS MATTER

On the domestic front, Professor Koh has left his stamp on Singapore museums in both numbers and quality. "When I first took over as chairman, I was dismayed by the low visitorship," he recounted. Challenges faced by the board then included the public's perception that museums were uncool and only for the elite. Setting a bold internal target of raising the visitorship from half-a-million to a million within three years, Professor Koh drove a rejuvenation of the NHB that saw the launch of blockbuster exhibitions, greater outreach to heartlanders and tourists, as well as a more active partnership with the business and art-loving and art-collecting communities.

Working together with schools and grassroots bodies such as the People's Association and roping in 'ambassadors' from

the local entertainment scene, the NHB embarked on a campaign to win the mind- and heart-share of Singaporeans who would otherwise have neglected the stories of the nation and those of the region. The board also mobilised the support of businesses and foundations, presenting the museums as partners for social events and corporate social responsibility programmes. "I also worked very hard with the media," revealed Professor Koh, "The media is a multiplier and I needed their partnership. I must say we have enjoyed very strong support from the media. Through these efforts, the NHB was able to exceed its own targets and Professor Koh is now looking forward to breaching the three-million mark, which would signify a six-fold increase in museum visitorship since 2002."

The NHB's attempt to work with the Singapore Tourism Board to attract more overseas visitors to make the museums a part of their itinerary has also borne fruit. "We are getting a significant percentage of tourists and some of the museums have become world famous," noted Professor Koh. "Ten years ago, visiting a museum in Singapore was not on the itinerary for most friends from China, Japan and India,

but now they know that there are many museums worth visiting."

Professor Koh also encouraged the museums to develop exhibitions that display the strengths of the national collection. "I was very proud of shows like *Beauty in Asya*, which was mainly from our collection and therefore homemade," he stated. Another high point he takes much pride in is the growing international recognition of the collections and capabilities of Singapore museums in events such as the Peranakan Museum's *Baba Bing* exhibition at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris.

One local museum has a special place in Professor Koh's heart. "I used to be a stamp collector when I was a child, so I have a particular affection for the Philatelic Museum," he said. "I have tried very hard to see how we can revitalise the Philatelic Museum and help them reinvent themselves so that they can prosper and endure."

"I would say the Philatelic Museum is a very important institution for Singapore, even if it's true that fewer and fewer people are using stamps and postcards. The Philatelic Museum is the most child-friendly institution in our family. Therefore, if for no other reason than that, we must preserve the Philatelic Museum. In the absence of a children's museum, the Singapore Philatelic Museum is the entry point to the world of museums for many families with young children."

Apart from its approachable scale and wealth of child-friendly installations, Professor Koh noted that this "little gem of a museum" is very quick on its feet to set up exhibitions that piggyback on special events such as the Youth Olympic Games and F1 race. "I recently asked them, for example, if they could mount an exhibition in November of stamps featuring the elephant, and they immediately said yes," he said of an upcoming Elephant Parade to be held in Singapore this November.

Professor Koh also expressed great satisfaction at the success of the annual *Singapore HeritageFest*. "This is an excellent way to bring heritage to the people," he stated. "It is also a way to celebrate our rich cultural diversity."

#### MAKING THE PAST COME ALIVE

Reflecting on more recent developments, Professor Koh offered his view that the union of the NHB with the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) is one

that "needs sensitive management". He added, "At a strategic level, I think it is the correct decision, but we must make sure that our friends in the PMB don't feel that we are taking away their autonomy or professionalism. What we should do is to help the PMB make our 64 national monuments better known to the public." Singling out the PMB's Monumental Walking Tours as an excellent initiative, he expressed his gratitude to the former Chairman of PMB, Alfred Wong and the current leadership of Chairman Tham Tuck Cheong and Director Jean Wee.

Taking the example of the Armenian Church, Professor Koh revealed that this national monument is enjoying a new lease of life thanks to a revival of the local Armenian community. "Ten years ago, it was in danger of disappearing - there were fewer than 20 Armenians in Singapore," he remarked. "But the happy story ten years later is that the community is now 60 in strength and they have the highest birth rate of any community in Singapore. They seem very happy here and I think the seven million-strong Armenian Diaspora appreciates the fact that we value them and have honoured them by making their church a national monument."

Donning his diplomat's hat once more, Professor Koh shared that the two nations are still forging close links. "For example, Professor CN Lee and Professor Peter Robless at the National University Hospital are training cardiac surgeons in Armenia," he said, adding that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently hosted a delegation of senior Armenian officials who wanted to gather lessons from Singapore which they could apply in their country.

Observing how monuments such as the Armenian Church and Hong San See temple have become the scenes of community events and musical performances, Professor Koh said, "I want our national monuments to come alive, to be visited and if appropriate, host festivals, functions and concerts."

In Professor Koh's opinion, Singapore's three new community heritage institutions, the Malay, Chinese and Indian heritage centres, will present an interesting challenge. Crediting the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan, former Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts and Foreign Affairs, for convincing the government to place the management of the three centres under the NHB, he said, "I

think we must not let him down. When the Malay Heritage Centre and the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall re-open, and the Indian Heritage Centre opens, we must make sure that their content is world-class and the quality and design of presentations are equal to the best of our institutions. But we must also manage them with great cultural and political sensitivity, because they are, after all, owned by their respective communities."

It is clear that Professor Koh is looking forward to a narrative of diversity when the heritage centres open or re-open their doors. Singapore's Indian and Malay communities, for instance, comprise peoples from various parts of India and the Malay Archipelago, respectively, so this diversity must be acknowledged. "We must keep a certain balance, openness and inclusiveness so nobody feels excluded," he maintained. "And we will tell all their stories."

Professor Koh also hopes that the NHB will continue to spread its wings abroad and "be the interface between Southeast Asia and the world." He added, "Beyond Southeast Asia, we should also get closer to the emerging Asian powers: the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indians, the Koreans." Recalling a recent trip to Seoul in which he was struck by the world-class quality of their museums, he remarked, "I was very impressed. The Koreans are really worth watching and we should connect more closely with them."

As he points out various paintings that showcase the artistry of fellow Singaporeans on the walls of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is clear that Professor Koh's passion and personal involvement with the Singapore story and those who have played a role on this stage pervade all his endeavours. "I still have many dreams," he shared, citing as examples his ideas of a children's museum, a museum of photography and moving pictures, and a Southeast Asian crafts museum. The national collection of textiles also deserves a museum of its own, he believes. But for now, he is simply looking forward to the day when he can converse with his new grandson, Toby. "Then we will have a good time together in the museums," he laughs, casting an eye on a Singapore where history comes alive for all ages. "I think it's important for us to treasure our past, to make it relevant to our present and our future."



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## TRIBUTES & THANKS

Declaring from the onset that he is no "solo performer", Professor Koh took the opportunity to thank those who have shared his vision for the NHB and helped bring it to fruition. "One of my few virtues is that I am a team player," he quipped. "I have been very lucky to have had good people, good CEOs like Lim Siam Kim, Lim Siok Peng and now, Michael Koh, working with me." The success of the Asian Civilisations Museum, according to Professor Koh, "is due in no small part to the leadership of James Khoo, Lim Siam Kim, Priscylla Shaw and Lee Suet Fern as well as Kenson Kwok, Huism Tan, Gauri Krishnan and their colleagues, and I want to say a very big thank you to them."

"As for Kenson, I owe a second thank you to him because he was the creative leader who helped set up the Peranakan Museum. At the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), I must thank the first three Chairmen, Dr. Earl Lu, Kwee Liong Keng and Koh Seow Chuan, and long-time Director, Kwok Kian Chow. They made SAM a highly respected museum. Under the current leadership of Jane Ittogi and Tan Boon Hui, SAM is in good hands."

"At the National Museum of Singapore, I first asked Professor Tan Tai Yong to be the chairman and when Tai Yong stepped down, I asked GK Goh because I wanted to bring in somebody from the private sector. I think Lee Chor Lin has done a super job at the National Museum."

"At SPM, I think Koh Seow Chuan, Daniel Teo and Tresnawati Prihadi have done a very good job. Tres is probably the most entrepreneurial of all our museum directors. She and her team have a difficult brief but have succeeded in many imagina-

tive ways."

"I think the Heritage Conservation Centre is a world-class institution. Loh Heng Noi and her team have done a wonderful job. That is why, at the opening of exhibitions, I always mention the contributions of the conservators, because people always forget that they play a very important role and are a valuable link in our value chain. The people behind the scenes - the curators, writers, designers - we should value all of them."

Professor Koh also expressed his gratitude to colleagues at the National Archives. "Kwok Kian Woon and Kwa Chong Guan have been excellent Chairmen," he said. "Lily Tan and Pitt Kuan Wah have built up the high reputation of NAS." He also highlighted Reflections at Bukit Chandu and the Memories at Old Ford Factory as excellent interpretative centres.

"Another highlight is *BeMuse*," he added. "When I was living in Washington D.C., I was a fan of the *Smithsonian* and I told myself that it would be wonderful if one day Singapore had a magazine of that genre and quality. I think *BeMuse*, under Thangamma Karthigesu and Marcus Ng, has become a first-class magazine in a short period of time. When I give copies to my foreign friends, they are happily surprised that we produce such a good magazine. So, to both of you, congratulations and thank you."

Finally, Professor Koh said he looked forward to the opening of The National Art Gallery, Singapore in three years time. He shared that when he instructed then NHB CEO Mrs Lim Siok Peng to make a bid for the City Hall and Supreme Court buildings, his dream was to make them into the home of Singapore's largest and most important museum. "Under the leadership of Koh Seow Chuan and Michael Koh, that dream will be realised," he said, adding that he is confident that The National Art Gallery, Singapore will be as iconic as the Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay.