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COVER STORY

Past Perfect

Evanna Ramly



Jalan Merdeka depicts Malaysia's journey to independence

A- A A+

For a significant segment of modern society, the museum experience is underrated. While digital references and online encyclopaedia may boast vast knowledge of global history and culture, nothing beats the power of seeing authentic remnants of the past in real life.

Yet somewhere among the stuffy confines and unattractive displays that have regrettably become the norm, certain gallery owners and curators have lost their touch and consequently, their audience.

Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin Tuanku Muhriz, executive adviser and director of the Asian Heritage Museum (AHM), believes it is about time to change the long-held view that a museum is merely an institution for education as opposed to a more interactive space. "That is absolutely necessary now in an age when there are so many other options and distractions," he says. "People today are too busy so you need something really compelling to draw them in."

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Advertisement for CHM Hotels featuring a couple in a modern hotel room. The text reads: "Enjoy the Conveniences and Comfort", "Totally Fulfilling Experience", "BOOK DIRECT & SAVE at www.chm-hotels.com", "Refer to Our Best Rate Pledge at selected hotels, T&C apply", "CHM HOTEL Management Sdn Bhd (198103-W)", and a list of hotel locations including Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Penang, and Pangkajene.

Founded in 2010, AHM is a special museum services company that aims to develop, establish, manage and operate a world-class Asia Pacific heritage museum promoting multiculturalism, regional heritage as well as regional peace and understanding.

Its diverse collection comprises Asian and geological artefacts. It currently has about 2,000 artefacts including a set of Malay drums that are 300 years old, which, at 12-feet tall each, are the largest in the world. There is also a 500kg Spanish mission bell dated 1784, made in the Philippines and recovered from a shipwreck. Ancient rare Chinese jade, bronze and ceramic artefacts abound including a Han jade pixiu, a Shang jade urn, a unique Ming Buddha, a Shang bronze cauldron, and an Eastern Chou/Warring States bronze sword with gold inlaid.

Since coming on board four years ago, Tunku Zain has been responsible for AHM exhibiting its prized artefacts at numerous events. At the same time, it also provides authentication service. "People who want to know the provenance of their pieces can contact us and we will arrange for experts to evaluate their items. What they want to do with them afterwards is entirely up to them."

But the long-term ambition of AHM has always been to have a permanent gallery in which to exhibit artefacts from around the region. "Some of these are very special items that date back centuries and we want them displayed permanently," reveals Tunku Zain.

By a sheer stroke of luck, the museum was granted a three-year tenancy of Carcosa and Seri Negara, two of Kuala Lumpur's most iconic landmarks perched atop a hill in Lake Gardens. Those with fond memories of what was once the official residence of Sir Frank Swettenham, the first British High Commissioner of Malaya, can look forward to insightful exhibitions and exciting cultural events that pay homage to the nation's storied heritage, besides offering a glimpse into the two mansions' glorious heyday.

AHM's inaugural exhibition is *Jalan Merdeka: Traversing the Routes Towards Independence*. Exploring the untold stories of Malaysia's fight for freedom, it was initially slated to run for a month in September but has been extended to the end of this month due to overwhelming interest.

"Apart from the permanent gallery and the continuing artefact events, we will also be doing special exhibitions, of which *Jalan Merdeka* is the first example," says Tunku Zain. "Over time, we will have walking tours and events out on the lawn here."

There is also a plan to have a permanent resource centre on the history of the two buildings themselves. "Carcosa and Seri Negara played many roles in Malaya and Malaysia's history. Numerous heads of state visited here. A lot of important meetings were held, and various treaties and agreements were also signed here. You can find two prominent examples at *Jalan Merdeka* – the Federation of Malaya agreement 1948 and 1957, both signed in Seri Negara."

In fact, the room in Seri Negara where the Malay Rulers signed the Federation of Malaya agreement 1957 currently features a recreation of that historic moment 60 years ago.

Feedback on its first project has been most encouraging, especially in terms of gaining new perspectives on history. Indeed, the exhibition shines the spotlight on rarely told stories such as that of the opposition forces and the effects of the Cold War on the nation, among others.

“I hope what we have achieved with *Jalan Merdeka* is just a microcosm of what we ought to achieve more broadly with AHM. Our mission is to unearth new and interesting stories, and having people appreciate different perspectives of what they thought they knew.”

This experience has already taught Tunku Zain and his team a great deal. “People have complained about the museum experience being staid and boring in general. We want to elevate that. What we have done (with *Jalan Merdeka*) is to make it more engaging by having a multimedia aspect. It’s not just an artefact and an accompanying caption. There is also the use of a video footage.”

Another way of making it more interesting is by placing some of the never-before-seen artefacts in very specific contexts. “The physical placement of artefacts matters because it makes people think in a way that they might not have appreciated before. One example was putting the Malay regiment soldiers in the same room as their enemy, the communists, instead of separately, for a fresh perspective.”

Adding colour and flavour is a series of special events to accompany the exhibition, from panel discussions and film screenings to joget workshops and even colouring competitions for children. “I think they will give a flavour of what we intend to do more broadly with the exhibitions that AHM will be doing in the future. Plus, it’s a great way to draw the crowd.”

While respecting the grandeur and history of Carcosa and Seri Negara, Tunku Zain is adamant about making the venue accessible to everyone. “One observation was that when it was a hotel, it was seen as quite an elitist location. We want to change that perception.”

He is very much inspired by what’s happening in the UK, Singapore as well as Penang, where heritage buildings have become sites for whole communities to come and enjoy, celebrate and use.

“I’m very happy to say that so far we have got great cooperation with both government agencies and the private sector, in particular the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Jabatan Muzium Malaysia, Arkib Negara, Filem Negara and CIMB Foundation.”

“Also, a lot of history and civil society groups such as Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia, Imagine Malaysia and Malaysian Nature Society all came in to help us make good use of the space. They have found a niche, an angle that enables them to tell something relevant for them here. This is something we really want to continue.”

When asked the criteria of AHM’s permanent space, Tunku Zain replies: “To be successful, the gallery needs a good location with the right physical space. Apart from that, it needs good artefacts and a good story.”



Tunku Zain hopes to highlight the region's history and its importance in modern civilisation

He notes that the story in question can be approached in different ways. "There is currently a lot of geopolitical rivalry and contestation in this region. A lot of analysts talk about this one-upmanship between the US and China in the South China Sea. What we want to highlight is that this was a region of great interaction and trade spanning from centuries ago between great civilisations. Then there were the different European colonial powers that remained here until World War II."

He continues: "We want to highlight the fact that it's not the first time that great powers are making their presence felt in places of the world that are useful to them geopolitically. This can manifest itself in ways of violence or in ways of peace, and we hope that this museum highlights the more peaceful side of the story. It is through this interaction over the centuries that has resulted in great civilisations and cultures. We should draw inspiration from this."

Indeed, at the heart of AHM are the promotion of peace and the dissemination of culture. "By culture, I don't mean the monolithic culture but cultures – all the great civilisations that were here and new cultures that arose from them."

On a personal level, the museum's mission truly resonates with Tunku Zain, who has been involved in civil society activism and organisations for years.

"I think it's very important for young Malaysians to better appreciate the fact that this country, and this region as a whole, has always been a melting pot. In a time when you have political forces trying to claim exclusivity over the land and over the whole narrative, it's crucial to highlight our very diverse history."

We can't wait to see what AHM has in store next.

This article first appeared in Focus Malaysia Issue 253.



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