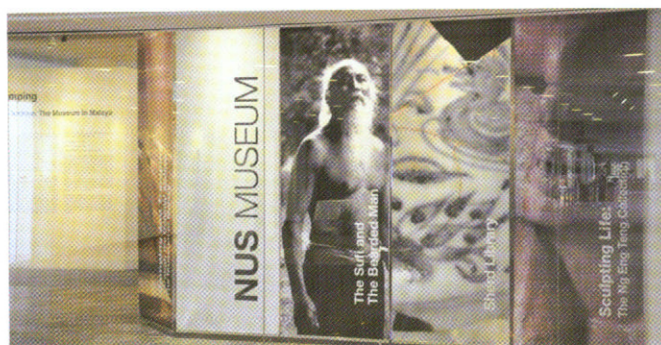




NUS Museum, National University of Singapore

By Tan Shook Fong



NUS Museum entrance; photo courtesy of NUS Museum

How many of us know that there is a beautiful boutique museum that belongs to the National University of Singapore? The three-level exhibition space is situated within the university's Kent Ridge complex at the University Cultural Centre. (As you face the front of the Cultural Centre, the Museum is to the right, at the end of the corridor.)

The top level houses the Ng Eng Teng Gallery, named for a prolific local sculptor whose style transitioned from traditional to contemporary and who donated many of the gallery's stone and ceramic sculptures. The South and Southeast Asian Gallery on the concourse level includes paintings and drawings, ceramics, sculptures, bronzes and textiles. In addition to occasional special exhibits, the lobby level houses the pride of the museum: a collection of fine Chinese ceramics from the Neolithic Age to the Qing Dynasty and beyond.

The University of Malaya Art Museum (precursor to the NUS Museum) was formally established in 1955 with a generous donation by Khoan Sullivan. When the museum was officially opened by the Pro-Chancellor of the University, Dr Michael Sullivan, a lecturer in art history at the University of Malaya (today's National University), was appointed its first curator. It was the first art museum for Singapore and Malaya and the centre of the art history programme. During his tenure, Sullivan actively expanded the museum's collection, and the institution soon gained prominence.

After Sullivan, William Willets was appointed the second curator in 1964. During his tenure, he quadrupled the size of the collection and is associated with the museum's expansion into Indian textiles and the start of its collection of fine South East Asian Ceramics. Owing to his efforts, in 1971 these ceramics were recognised as collectibles by the university

and South East Asian Ceramics became a field of study in the art history course.

Willets left office in 1973 because the museum was closed, the official reason being that there were few visitors due to the inaccessibility of the museum and that no students had registered for art history. Half of the museum's items were moved to Kuala Lumpur, and the other half were transferred to the National Museum, where they remained in storage. This was a significant blow to the development of art scholarship in Singapore.

In 1989, the collection was returned to the university. But the works remained in storage until 2002 when the opening of the South and Southeast Asian Art gallery kicked off the NUS Museum as a fine museum with its own collections.

Today the museum continues its role in education, research, and publishing in the tradition of fine university museums. The MRT Circle Line will soon have a station at the National University Hospital, from which a feeder bus drops passengers off right at the University Cultural Centre. The Museum is open free of charge to the public and is well worth a visit.

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Memories of NUS Museum

Michael Sullivan the first curator: "In 1954, Khoan and I went in the face of fierce opposition from our friends who said we would sink into obscurity in Singapore, where the University of Malaya, as it then was, had offered me the post of Lecturer in the History of Art; a surprising new departure, considering that Singapore was widely looked upon as a 'cultural desert'. But four Chinese artists who became our friends were working there; Cheong Soo Pieng, Liu Kang, Chen Wen-hsi and Che' en Chong-swee while the small private Nanyang Academy of Art, run by Lim Hak-tai, was struggling to survive. [...] There were no collections in Singapore of the work of living artists. Khoan and I founded the University Art Museum with the blessing of two vice-chancellors and the support of Loke Wan-tho and Malcolm MacDonald, Commissioner General for Southeast Asia. [...] During the years we were there, the modern art movement in Singapore, and indeed the whole of Southeast Asia, was in its infancy. It has since blossomed into a rich maturity."

Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Art: The Khoan and Michael Sullivan Collection*. Excerpt from [Exhibition brochure] *Camping and Tramping Through the Colonial Archive: The Museum in Malaya*, NUS Museum, 2010.