



DESIGN: MIKE M DIZON PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN, IANS

New face

The Asian Civilisations Museum opens two new wings on Saturday, including a riverfront wing with an entrance leading down to the Singapore River promenade. **Huang Lijie** reports. **D2&3**

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arts | life | **D3**

Asian Civilisations Museum opens two new wings and has a 24-hour celebration of its first phase of revamp



Huang Lijie
Arts Correspondent

The Asian Civilisations Museum opens two new wings on Saturday, with an invitation to the public to get intimate with its new spaces and collection.

The museum, in a first, will keep its doors open for 24 hours, with round-the-clock programmes, including an outdoor barbecue, late-night tours and a sleepover in an events room overlooking the river, to celebrate the unveiling of the first phase of its revamp.

The \$25-million makeover of the historic Empress Place building began in the third quarter of last year. The aim is to increase the exhibition space and make the place more inviting.

The 148-year-old building was last renovated in 2003, when the

museum moved into the space.

The new titanium-clad Riverfront wing and Kwek Hong Png wing add more than 1,300 sq m of space to the museum, making for a total of more than 15,000 sq m. Both are designed by Greenhill, a home-grown architectural firm founded by Mr Nigel Greenhill and Ms Li Sau Kei.

On the contemporary material and design of the new wings, the museum's director, Dr Alan Chong, says it is in keeping with the prevailing architectural philosophy towards building extensions for heritage monuments.

"It makes for cleaner possibilities and you can still read the old building as an entity," he adds.

The architects say: "The architect-

ture of the new extensions does not mimic the past, rather it represents the architecture of the 21st century, while successfully complementing and integrating with the existing building."

The renewal of the museum extends to its curatorial direction.

While it continues representing the heritage cultures of Singapore, the focus has shifted from looking at the Chinese, Indian and Malay worlds as separate entities to being interconnected and the crucible for Singapore's "unique position in the world as an intersection of many cultures", says Dr Chong.

"Singapore didn't spring out of nowhere, it emerged alongside other port cities of Asia and people have often shared religions and

ideas through trade, migration and pilgrimage, so we've used this as a way of curating our new galleries."

The new galleries are no longer devoted to distinct geographies, but organised to respond to the themes of trade and the exchange of ideas, faith and belief.

This change is seen in the two galleries opening this weekend - the Khoo Teck Puat gallery, which is dedicated to the study of the famous Tang Shipwreck, and the Scholar In Chinese Culture gallery, which explores the scholar in Chinese culture and its association with Confucianist beliefs.

Here is a look at what is new, ahead of the opening.

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VIEW IT/ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

WHERE: 1 Empress Place
WHEN: 10am to 7pm (Saturday to Thursday), 10am to 9pm (Friday)
ADMISSION: Free for everyone till Nov 22. Thereafter, free for Singaporeans, permanent residents and children aged six and below, except special exhibitions, which are \$8 for adults and \$4 for students and seniors



The Riverfront wing houses the Khoo Teck Puat Gallery and its Tang Shipwreck collection.
ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Riverfront wing

RIVERFRONT ENTRANCE AND TERRACE

The new entrance opens out onto a public terrace that leads down to the Singapore River promenade. The welcoming and prominent entry establishes the museum as a key presence along the revitalised river and a landmark on the Jubilee Walk, which winds through the Civic District and will be launched on Nov 29. The titanium-clad glass structure also opens up the museum's interiors to a view from the waterfront, making it more inviting.

On the motivation behind the change, the museum's director, Dr Alan Chong, says: "The museum needed to open itself up more. Previously, there was just one entrance and there was a wing along the river, but it was completely occupied by a restaurant and people didn't associate it with the rest of the museum."

The extension reorients the museum towards the waterfront, emphasising the building's historic relationship to its location. A former government building, it has stood at the mouth of the river since Singapore's beginnings in the 19th century as a port city.

KHOO TECK PUAT GALLERY

This permanent gallery anchors the single-storey wing and its location, steps away from the waterfront, resonates with the Tang Shipwreck collection on display. The shipwreck was found off Belitung Island in the Java Sea in 1998 with an impressive cargo of 60,000 pieces of ceramics produced in China during the Tang dynasty, as well as gold and silver objects. The collection was acquired with the help of the estate of Khoo Teck Puat, in honour of the late business tycoon. More than 500 pieces of the cargo will be on display.

The museum's curator of South-east Asia, Dr Stephen Murphy, says the shipwreck points to how Singapore sits within a region that "lay at the heart of a global trading network in the ninth century" and how its success as a hub of global trade today "has ancient roots".

He adds: "The collection itself is one of the most important worldwide, with regard to Tang ceramics and global trade in the ninth century, and it is now accessible to the public and scholars for many generations to come."

Adding to the experience of the gallery are the many circular skylights that bathe the precious artefacts with daylight and allow their exquisite craftsmanship to shine. The Tang Shipwreck can also be experienced through a virtual-reality mobile app that allows the user to step into the shoes of a member of the ship's crew or those of a marine archaeologist recovering the cargo. The app can be downloaded for free from Saturday from the App Store and Google Play.

CAFE AND RESTAURANT

The two new food-and-beverage outlets, operated by the Prive Group, will allow the museum to widen its appeal as a lifestyle destination. The cafe, Prive, offers affordable all-day dining including items such as eggs benedict (\$16) and seafood laksa (\$15), while Empress, which opens at the end of the month, is a fine-dining Cantonese restaurant with an outdoor bar.



ARTEFACTS ON SHOW



Square dish with swastika, southern China, around 830s, gold
This dish is one of a pair that may have been made as saucers for lobed drinking bowls. The central design of blossoms and leaves forms a swastika, a Buddhist symbol of good fortune that also appears on bronze mirrors and ceramics. The pair of dishes are the only known Tang examples with this design.



Ewer, China, probably Gongxian kilns, around 830s, stoneware
This large ewer is one of the finest ceramics found in the Tang Shipwreck. The incised lozenge motif with leafy fronds is an Iranian design seen on other objects in the wreck, which suggests that much of the cargo was destined for the Gulf.



Ewer with feline-shaped handle, China, probably Gongxian kilns, around 830s, stoneware
The handle of this pitcher is a tiger playfully peering into the vessel. The spout is formed as a dragon's head. Chinese kilns produced white vessels that were splashed with green glaze. Several colours could be used for this technique, but green examples appealed specially to the Islamic Middle East.



Wine flask, southern China, around 830s, silver, partly gilded
Complete with a handle and cover, this is the only known example of a silver wine flask dating to the Tang dynasty. The ornate decoration includes a pair of mandarin ducks, a symbol of marital bliss. The silver was once entirely gilded.

PHOTOS: ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

BOOK IT/24HOURS@ACM

WHAT: The 24-hour celebration of the opening of the museum's new wings includes outdoor picnics, cultural performances, film screenings and a sleepover. After midnight, the museum's director, Dr Alan Chong, and the GreenhillLi architects will hold tours of the space and there will be a party with DJs.

WHERE: Asian Civilisations Museum

WHEN: Saturday, 7pm to Sunday, 7pm

ADMISSION: Free, but the sleepover is limited to 80 people. Registration opens tomorrow at acm.org.sg

Skylights bathe the Tang Shipwreck artefacts with daylight and allow their craftsmanship to shine.
PHOTO: LIM YAHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES