

# PERANAKAN MUSEUM

GUIDE









peranakan MUSEUM  
GUIDE





WEDDING GARMENT (SEE PAGE 80)  
(OPPOSITE) PINK CHUPU (SEE PAGE 166)



# PERANAKAN MUSEUM

GUIDE





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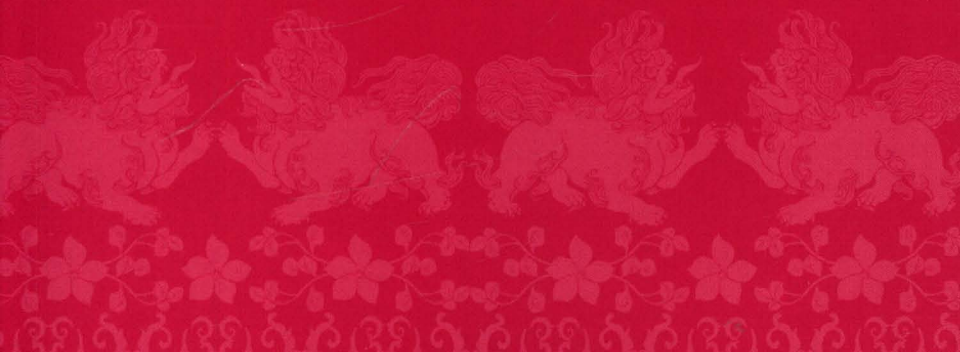
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## **Spelling**

There is no standardised spelling of Baba Malay words. The spellings used in this book reflect the closest transliteration of the words as spoken.


*Pinyin* is used for Chinese. Please refer to the glossary.





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Singapore is a multicultural state, formed by centuries of trade, immigration, colonial networks, and modern statecraft. The surrounding region of Southeast Asia (what is now Malaysia and Indonesia) shared in this rich pattern of economic and cultural exchange.

The term “Peranakan” refers to the community that arose from traders and migrants who married local Malay-speaking women. In the past, this culture has been called Straits Chinese or Baba-Nyonya (the names for Peranakan men and women, respectively). “Straits Chinese” refers to those born in the Straits of Malacca and the British colonies called the Straits Settlements, comprising Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. But Peranakan culture arose before the British arrived in the region, and stretched beyond those ports, to Thailand and Indonesia.

Peranakan culture defies easy classification, and scholars are still in the process of defining it. It has clear elements of Chinese identity as well as components of the Malay world. The cultures of the Indian Ocean have also left their trace, as have the colonial trading networks of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. But perhaps we should worry less about these sources than about the new art forms created and commissioned by the Peranakans—delight in their vibrant colours and understand the social context of the objects.

A close look at Peranakan culture helps us shed concepts of cultural purity. Peoples have been moving from region to region, and marrying other ethnic groups for a very long time. These mixed communities—whether called hybrid, mestizo, creole, blended, or Peranakan—produced their own special cultures. New languages, cuisines, ways of dress, social customs, as well as distinct artistic forms arise from these fusions. It is less important to identify what has been borrowed from other cultures,

(OPPOSITE) **FACADE OF THE  
OLD TAO NAN SCHOOL**  
Early 20th century



than it is to appreciate the unique identity of new forms. The Peranakans thus provide an example for looking at other cultures: they remind us to look beyond the strict notions of nationality and ethnicity to discover the value of diverse and combined societies.

As Singapore and Southeast Asia have modernised, many traditional ways of life have been lost. It is not so long ago that Baba Malay was a day-to-day language in the ports of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, and that grand houses, with ancestral shrines and specifically commissioned porcelain, provided shelter for multiple generations. And that the sarong kebaya could be regularly seen. These remain living memories for some, and we can only have a strong sense of nostalgia for this special and highly cultivated culture.

**Alan Chong**

Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum  
and the Peranakan Museum







## The Peranakan World: An Introduction

Southeast Asia has been one of the crossroads of the world since ancient times. Traders from many lands travelled the maritime routes connecting East Asia with the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and Europe. Consequently, many foreign merchants settled in Singapore and other pivotal centres along this route, married local women, and contributed to the development of a vibrant, hybrid culture. “Peranakan” comes from a Malay word *anak* (child), which can be loosely translated as “local-born” (as in born here, but not considered as native). Chinese Peranakans are the majority, but there are also Peranakan communities of other ethnicities in Southeast Asia, including Arab, Indian, and Eurasian. Peranakan Chinese are descendants of southern Chinese traders who settled in Southeast Asia. Peranakan Chinese culture (also known as Baba-Nyonya; *baba* refers to men, *nyonya* to women) in some respects is deeply rooted in Chinese traditions and values, but is overall a fusion mingled with Southeast Asian and European influences.

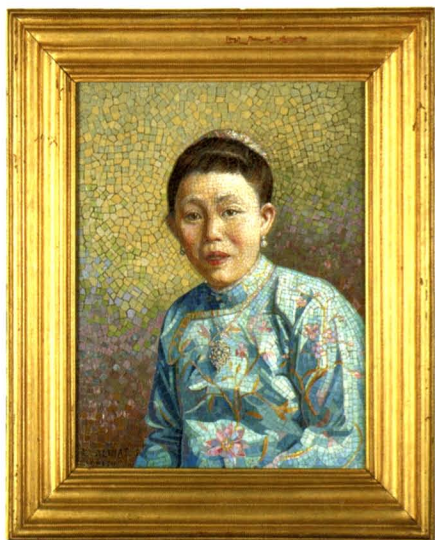
A Peranakan Chinese community developed in parts of Indonesia in the early 16th century, when some areas were under the rule of the Portuguese, and later the Dutch. By the 19th century, Peranakan Chinese had established themselves in many parts of Southeast Asia, namely Java, Sumatra, Phuket, Rangoon, and the British Straits Settlements of Malaya (Malacca, Penang, and Singapore). Singapore, the capital of the Straits Settlements and a thriving entrepôt, attracted Peranakans from across the region.

The Peranakan Chinese played a prominent role in commerce, politics, and social affairs in 19th-century Southeast Asia. They established strong relationships with colonial merchant houses and the British administration, and were regarded as a bridge









to the wider population. Interaction and identification with the colonial powers became an important aspect of the Peranakan cultural blend and identity. They were considered community leaders, because of their management of temples and clan associations, by the more recent immigrants from China (known as *sinkeh*—new guests). Their ability to speak Malay, the lingua franca of the region, also meant that the Peranakans could do business effectively with indigenous Southeast Asians.

Peranakan art reflects these diverse influences. The so-called golden era—the late 19th to early 20th century—produced many of the most important and beautiful objects of porcelain, beadwork, embroidery, and furniture. Some were commissioned in China, others were made locally. The Peranakan phenomenon of comfortably blending different cultures and adapting to local situations retains its resonance in a globalised world.



## Peranakan Art and Culture: A History of the Peranakan Museum

The Peranakan Museum opened to the public in April 2008. The eclectic classical style building that houses it was built between 1910 and 1912, as the Tao Nan School. After the collection of the National Museum, which began life in the 19th century as the Raffles Library and Museum, was divided in 1993, the newly formed Asian Civilisations Museum occupied the building from 1997 to 2003.

In the 1980s, the National Museum had started actively collecting Peranakan objects for a dedicated display. The Straits Chinese Gallery re-created spaces in a Peranakan home, including the bridal chamber and the living room, and it drew on a small but representative collection of Peranakan furniture. It is noteworthy that at the time the culture was regarded as somewhat of a dying curiosity: the exhibition brochure exalted it as “sociologically exotic” and as “unlikely...to be revived to any great extent”.

The Peranakan community’s sense of identity and appreciation of its own material culture had been declining since the Second

**STRAITS CHINESE GALLERY  
AT THE NATIONAL  
MUSEUM, SINGAPORE,  
THE FIRST PERMANENT  
EXHIBITION ON  
PERANAKAN ART.  
1985**

**(OPPOSITE) MR AND MRS  
TAN SOO BIN**  
Italy, Florence  
Early 20th century  
Glass mosaic  
National Museum of  
Singapore. Gift of Mdm  
Rosalind Tay in loving  
memory of her mother  
Mrs Mary Tay née  
Mary Tan Jeng Neo,  
youngest daughter of  
Mr and Mrs Tan Soo Bin  
1999-00803, 1999-00804







**PHOTOGRAPH: A STRAITS CHINESE FAMILY**

1920s

Peranakans typically stayed under one roof with their extended families before the Second World War (1942–45).

**(OPPOSITE, TOP) MARGARET CHAN PERFORMING AS EMILY.**

The play was staged in the *Emily of Emerald Hill* exhibition at the Peranakan Museum, Singapore, in 2012. She was the first actor to play the role in Singapore in 1985.

**(OPPOSITE, BOTTOM) FESTIVE EXPRESSIONS, THE FIRST MUSEUM CATALOGUE ABOUT PERANAKAN ART**

World War. Children learned Mandarin and English in school, and fewer could speak Baba Malay, the language of the Peranakan Chinese of Singapore. As Peranakans moved into smaller flats with their nuclear families, inherited collections became fragmented and were divided, or sold. Collectors, dealers, and Peranakans recall how after the war the market was flooded with Peranakan furniture, porcelain, beadwork, and embroidery—and all were available at cheap prices.<sup>1</sup> Some astute Peranakan families, British civil servants, and other collectors in the region took advantage of this opportunity, and many private collections began forming around this time. The displays at the Peranakan Museum are enriched by generous long-term loans from some of them.

The small display of Peranakan culture in the Straits Chinese Gallery at the National Museum corresponded with heightened public and community interest. Around this time, Peranakan

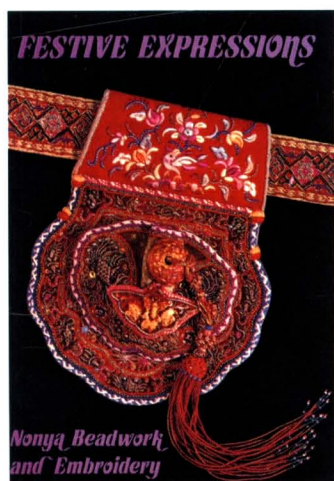


culture was promoted as a model of what a truly Singaporean culture might be like. (The new multi-ethnic nation had been formed only in 1965.) Nostalgia for a time past also motivated the community, and Baba Malay plays, dance, and music were revived. In 1982 local playwright Stella Kon wrote *Emily of Emerald Hill*, a one woman play featuring a Peranakan matriarch named Emily Gan; it has since become one of Singapore's most beloved plays.



Pioneering books on Peranakan art were published, among which Ho Wing Meng's series of collector guides for furniture, porcelain, metalworks, beadwork, and embroidery remain important references. In 1989, the National Museum published its first book devoted to Peranakan art, *Festive Expressions: Nonya Beadwork and Embroidery*.

At the National Museum, the collection of Peranakan objects grew substantially and more exhibitions were organised as general appreciation of Peranakan art and culture continued apace in the 1990s. In 1993, the National Museum was devolved as three institutions: the Singapore History Museum (later renamed as the National Museum of Singapore), the Singapore Art Museum, and the Asian Civilisations Museum, which inherited the Southeast Asian and ethnological collections. The first Peranakan exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum was *Gilding the Phoenix: The Straits Chinese and their Jewellery* (1993).<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was the first to recognise a distinctive Peranakan style, a





blend of forms, techniques, and designs inherited from Chinese, Malay, Indian, and European cultures. A preference for profuse detail, richness of ornamentation, a contrasting colour palette, and rounded surfaces defined the style.<sup>3</sup> Two more exhibitions on Peranakan culture in the 1990s went beyond describing its national relevance to focus on its regional significance as a unique cultural blend within Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The collection grew at an accelerated pace in the 2000s as plans to build a Peranakan Museum were approved in 2004 by the Singapore government. The good reception and visitorship of the Peranakan exhibitions in Singapore thus far, the uniqueness of the Peranakan story, and that material was relatively obtainable were some of the reasons for creating a museum dedicated to the culture.<sup>5</sup> The basis of the Peranakan Museum collection was drawn from the Southeast Asian collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. New acquisitions were made to fill in gaps. Key donations came from established Peranakan families and collections in Singapore. Keenly aware of the need to represent contemporary Peranakan identity, paintings reflecting current concerns by a new generation of Peranakan artists were also acquired. The museum also engaged with Peranakan community advisors and associations.<sup>6</sup>

By the time of the opening of the Peranakan Museum in 2008, Peranakan heritage was back in style, and, in fact, had become a commodity and marketing tool. Restaurants and shops specialising in Peranakan food and fashion opened. Local media played a part in widening the popular appeal of Peranakan culture. Several productions featuring Peranakan themes were produced for television, most notably the highly popular series *The Little Nyonya*. The last episode was reportedly the most watched one-hour programme in the history of Singapore television.<sup>7</sup>