‘Peranakan Legacy’ at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore

The permanent exhibition Peranakan Legacy, which was launched at the Asian Civilisations Museum’s main wing in 2000, has received an overwhelmingly positive response from visitors and overseas institutions keen to borrow the collection. Its appeal is largely due to interest in the unique fusion of cultures in the former Straits Settlements of Malaya and Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and other areas of the region during the colonial period. The exhibition adds an important dimension to the museum’s mission of exploring Singapore’s ‘ancestral cultures’ by demonstrating, in material culture terms, the value of such cross-cultural developments.

Cross-cultural fertilization

The exhibition explores several themes with an underlying concern to unravel diverse sources of cultural influence. The displays are organized around themes and materials – social customs such as betel-chewing and weddings, the nonyas’ own production of textile arts, stylistic developments in dress and jewellery fashions at the turn of the century, and the important legacies of silver and porcelain that were handed down as family heirlooms. The cross-cultural fertilization of ideas, materials, and designs was often underpinned by the tastes of the nonyas who commissioned craftspeople from different ethnic groups. Although fashions changed, a distinct Peranakan aesthetic can be seen in their taste for elaborate designs executed with exquisite skill: horsetail out of the Malay sense of refinement (halus). This is illustrated by nineteenth-century examples of the Malay-style brooch (kerong) with Malay rose-cut diamonds (intan) and later examples with brilliant-cut diamonds (berlian) produced by Indian jewellers, whose new cutting and setting techniques improved their sparkling quality (photo 3).

Metalwork was another important aspect of material culture patronized by wealthy nonyas. They commissioned local Malay and Chinese silversmiths to produce a wide range of items, including pillow ends (kibah), ornamental vessels, tea sets for weddings, ritual water sprinklers, and hangings to decorate wedding beds. Perhaps some of the best examples demonstrate the blending of Malay metalworking techniques such as repoussé and filigree work, often stained a rich orange tone, with Chinese designs that include auspicious motifs such as the mythical pili (symbolising the birth of sons) and Buddhist emblems (photo 4). Perhaps the best expressions of Peranakan taste are those that were produced by the nonyas themselves. Embroidery and beadwork using imported glass beads were painstakingly undertaken by young unmarried nonyas to produce accessories for their wedding trousseau. These demonstrated the ideal feminine virtues of industriousness, patience, and artistic skill, as well as how much time the maker had free for such labour, and were indicators of a family’s social standing and a woman’s marriageability.

Contextualization and future developments

One of the curatorial challenges of the exhibition was to address the need for greater contextualization, despite limited collections. Small semi-contextual displays provide one solution. These include a display of an ancestral altar and a wedding bed, which, when fully dressed, becomes a focal point of the wedding chamber. Carved in sawu wood in southern China, the ornate red-and-gold style bed with its embroidered silk curtains, canopies, cushions, and golden hanging flower baskets (buket bunga), decorated profusely with every imaginable Chinese auspicious motif, is in effect a ‘shrine to fertility and wealth’ (Lee & Chen 1998:72). Designs include Buddhist and Daoist motifs, cranes and peaches (emblems of longevity), plants in fruit (abundance), and the signature motif of the Peranakans, the phoenix and peony (symbols of beauty, wealth, and status). Continuation of the patriarchal family line through the birth of sons was of great concern. The ultimate rite to this end was the anak keling ritual, in which a young boy rolled across the bed three times during preparations for the traditional twelve-day Chinese wedding. Anecdotal evidence informs us that the bed’s owner travelled continuously over the course of her childbearing years between Singapore and her first home in Peraeng (where the bed was kept), in the belief that this particular bed would ensure the safe births of her children.

Peranakan culture holds great nostalgia and significance for local communities and is an attraction for overseas visitors who wish to uncover unique Southeast Asian cultures. The success of the exhibition has inspired the museum to develop its collections and undertake further research on less well-documented Peranakan communities, such as the Indian Peranakans (or Chitty Melakans), the Dutch Eurasians in Java, and smaller communities in Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand. The documentation of oral histories and living traditions practised by Peranakans today will be given greater priority where the exhibition is revamped as part of ambitious plans for a dedicated Peranakan museum.

Agenda

The exhibition ‘Peranakan Legacy’ is on permanent display at the Museum’s main wing at 15 Armenian Street, Singapore 199541.

References


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The Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore is part of the Asia-Europe Museum network. More information on ASEMUS: www.asemus.org