

MEDIA RELEASE

East Meets West In New Photography Exhibition At The Asian Civilisations Museum

Black-and-white portraits of Asian rulers and dignitaries from the late 19th to early 20th centuries capture a period of openness and understanding in East-West relations, fashion and photographic technology

[22 October 2008, SINGAPORE] Step into the photographer's studio at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and come up close and personal with sultans, rajas, diplomats and socialites from all over Asia. The ACM's new exhibition, ***Neither East Nor West: Asians In Monochrome***, opens tomorrow and will be on show from 23 October 2008 to 1 February 2009. Co-organised with the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, the exhibition features 52 black-and-white photographs from the late 19th to early 20th centuries. The name of the exhibition takes inspiration from *The Ballad of East and West* by Rudyard Kipling, whose portrait also features in the exhibition. The central message of Kipling's ballad – the equality of mankind – is exemplified through the stories of these featured personalities.

Featured in the exhibition are royalty such as Sultan Idris of Perak, King Chulalongkorn of Siam, Princess Shimazu of Japan and six Indian Maharajas. Others include renowned diplomats such as China's Wellington Koo with his wife Oei Hui Lan, the glamorous heiress daughter of Peranakan sugar-tycoon Oei Tiong Ham. The majority of the photographs on show were taken at the famous Lafayette Studio on Bond Street in London. The original glass negatives for these images are kept in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Images from the same period from one of Singapore's longest surviving photo studios, G.R. Lambert & Co. are included as a contrast.

“These were exciting times with an emergence of an early global culture. People from all over the world were travelling more and opening their eyes and minds to an exchange of dialogue, cultures and ideas. *Neither East Nor West* takes us back to those times, and that spirit of openness and understanding is what we hope to capture through the exhibition,” said Ms Tan Huism, Deputy Director for Curation and Collections, ACM.

The photographer and his studio – Studio Lafayette

Following the invention of photography in 1827, having one’s photograph taken was soon all the rage in cosmopolitan Europe. At the same time, the advent of the railway and steamship brought about a boom in international travel. One such traveller was photographer James Stack Lauder from Dublin, who ventured to London to set up his own studio under the fashionably-French name of ‘Lafayette’. The studio soon established itself as a premier portrait studio, earning a royal commission and attracting an elite clientele.

Dressing the part and making an impression

These sitters, or those who sat for portraits, spared no effort to ensure that they were well represented. While some Asian sitters chose to wear their traditional costumes, many also opted for Western dress. Resplendent in their finery, they provide an insight not only into what was fashionable at the time but also how the sitters saw themselves and how they wished to be portrayed to the world.

Sitters photographed in the latest European fashions may have done so to appear progressive, modern and well-travelled. One notable exception is a portrait of Indian Princesses Catherine (1871 – 1942) and Sophia (1876 – 1948), daughters of the last Maharaja of the Punjab. Having spent most of their lives in exile in England, the sisters were renowned activists for the social and political rights of English women. For their Lafayette studio portrait, they chose to be shown in traditional Indian apparel, showcasing a different aspect of their identity, as the last members of a dynasty which ruled one of India’s most powerful states.

At the same time, sitters in Western dress may also have retained traditional touches in the form of jewellery, headdress or fabrics. One example is Sultan Idris of Perak (1849 – 1916) who infused his Western-inspired military uniform with Malay identity through the addition of a traditional *songket* (gold and silver woven silk) waistcloth.

Equally lavishly dressed is the Maharaja Sir Ranjitsinghji Vibhaji Jam Sahib of Nawanagar (1872 – 1933). "Ranji" as he was affectionately known, was devoted to improving the living conditions of his people. He was instrumental in the construction of a port, a network of roads, railways and irrigation works; as well as hospitals, dispensaries and animal sanctuaries. He was also described by Time magazine as 'the greatest Indian cricketer of all time'. His confident gaze does little to suggest that he had lost an eye in a hunting accident five years before his picture was taken at the Lafayette Studio.

"This exhibition is a visual feast of some of the most important people of the times, photographed in a very glamorous way. But beyond that, every sitter has a story to tell, and it is these stories that we hope visitors will discover when they visit the exhibition," enthused Ms Nicola Kuok, curator of the exhibition and Assistant Curator (West Asia), ACM.

Neither East Nor West: Asians In Monochrome will be on show at the Asian Civilisations Museum from 23 October 2008 to 1 February 2009. Admission charges are S\$5.00 for adults and S\$2.50 for senior citizens and students.

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About the Asian Civilisations Museum

The Asian Civilisations Museum's mission is to explore and present the cultures and civilisations of Asia, so as to promote awareness and appreciation of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans and their links to Southeast Asia and the World. The Asian Civilisations Museum first began its operations at Armenian Street in 1997, which closed at end-2005, and re-opened on 25 April 2008 as the Peranakan Museum. The ACM's flagship at the historic Empress Place Building opened on 2 March 2003.

For more information and pictures, please contact:

Jennifer Quong

Manager, Marketing and Corporate Communications

Tel : +65 6332 7991

Mobile: +65 9231 6130

Fax : +65 6883 0732

Email : jennifer_quong@nhb.gov.sg

Natasha Ross

Assistant Manager, Marketing and Corporate Communications

Tel : +65 6332 4410

Fax : +65 6883 0732

Email : natasha_ross@nhb.gov.sg

www.acm.org.sg

Address

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555

Museum Front Desk: +65 6332 7798

Public Programmes Hotline: +65 6332 3284

Opening Hours

Mondays : 1pm – 7pm

Tuesdays – Sundays : 9am – 7pm (to 9pm on Fridays)

Annex: Programmes in conjunction with *Neither East Nor West*

‘East meets West’ Festival

8 & 9 November 2008 (Saturday – Sunday)

12pm – 6pm

Free entry to galleries from 9am – 7pm

Drop by for an exciting afternoon of East Meets West fun! Modern dance grooves with an ethnic touch and feet-tapping music await you. Kids can also join in the fun with colourful puppet shows and craft activities.

Also, catch the special exhibition *Neither East Nor West: Asians In Monochrome!* Admission to the exhibition and all galleries is free all day, just for this weekend.

Curator’s Tour

7 November, 5 December 2008, 9 January 2009 (Fridays)

7.30pm – 8.30pm

\$12 per person, registration is required

Get the stories behind the personalities and portraits of *Neither East Nor West* as the exhibition curator takes you back to the old-world glamour and history of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For enquiries on programmes, please call the Programmes hotline at 6332 3284 or email nhb_acm@nhb.gov.sg.

To register for programmes, please log on to www.acm.org.sg.