

The Straits Times

Published 5 April 2017

Spotlight on monuments that became the National Gallery

by Melody Zaccheus

Gallery will launch exhibition in June to tell story of the two buildings it occupies, over a year after its opening

After opening its doors for more than a year, the National Gallery Singapore will finally be launching an exhibition in June dedicated to telling the story of the two national monuments it occupies.

Apart from art aficionados, the space has been attracting architecture and heritage buffs interested in the history and conservation of the former Supreme Court and City Hall.

In 2015, to meet demand, the Gallery doubled its Building Highlights tours to twice a day during weekends and public holidays. Each tour can accommodate about 20 people.

The new exhibition, called Listening to Architecture: The Gallery's Histories and Transformations, will be divided into two sections.

The first details the histories of the two buildings, while the second documents their transformation into the National Gallery Singapore.

Speaking to The Straits Times, assistant curator Joleen Loh said a selection of artefacts from two archaeological excavations by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute archaeologists will form part of the display in the first section.

One of the artefacts is a handmade brick likely from the Grand Hotel de l'Europe which was torn down and eventually replaced by the Supreme Court building. The brick remnants were discovered by the archaeologists during the first excavation in 2009.

On the former hotel, Ms Loh referred to a Biblioasia article – The Padang: Centrepiece of Colonial Design – by architectural historian Lai Chee Kien, who wrote about the area.

Dr Lai wrote that the Supreme Court site dates back to 1823, when English merchant **Edward**

Boustead was given land to build his family home.

"The palatial house was subsequently turned into a series of hotels before it was demolished to build the Grand Hotel de l'Europe in 1905 which, together with the Raffles Hotel, was regarded as one of the finest lodgings in South-east Asia."

"The hotel closed down in 1932 and the site was acquired by the government to build the Supreme Court," wrote Dr Lai.

Ms Loh said some of the other artefacts from the dig, which date back to the Temasek era (1300s to 1600s), will likely be showcased as well.

Although the line-up is still being firmed up, the artefacts would likely include a porcelain statuette of what appears to be the torso of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara or Chinese deity Guangyin.

ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute archaeologist Lim Chen Sian said the artefact is significant as it was the first Buddhist figurine uncovered in an excavation in Singapore, thereby providing evidence of the belief systems ancient Singaporeans could have practised.

He said other Buddhist figurines have since been uncovered at other excavations.

Mr Lim added: "The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara suggests that Buddhism may have been one of the religious systems practised during the Temasek era. The Qingbai porcelain, characterised by its bluish-white colour, dates to the 14th century and was produced at the Jingdezhen kilns in Jiangxi province in southern China."

Ms Loh said: "One reason the Gallery commissioned the excavation was to study the existence of civilisation which preceded the colonial period. Our aim is to insert into viewers' consciousness these material traces of history because there are few writings and

records from this era. We're planning to put artefacts on display because it is important to be able to think about history as constantly evolving."

The second section of the upcoming exhibition will feature details on the massive

conservation and construction project of the National Gallery, which cost \$532 million.

National Gallery Singapore said that more details about this exhibition will be shared closer to the opening date. Entry to the exhibition, and Building Highlights tour, is free.