



STUDENT-LED TOURS

DIVINE BODIES

The Divine and its Embodied Sites

by MUHAMMAD HARIZ B EMRAN

DIVINE BODIES

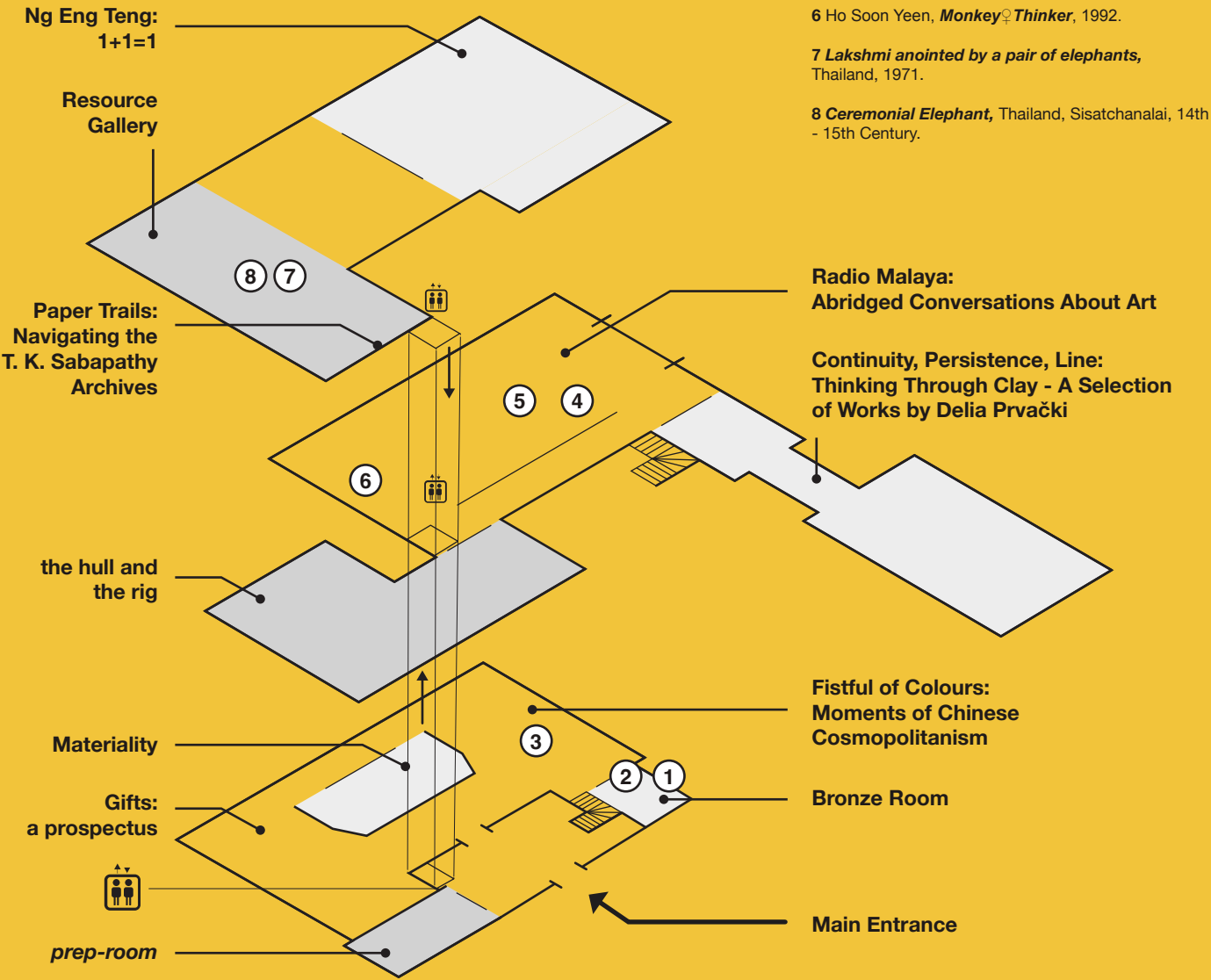
The Divine and its Embodied Sites

Divine Bodies invites you to consider the human body as a site of and for divinity. The tour showcases a variety of artefacts from the Museum's collections and permanent exhibitions, covering different time periods and civilisations. Each object features the human body in unique forms, using distinct motifs and materials. These artefacts not only represent recurring themes and differences related to the body and divinity, but also spark discussions about how they were acquired by the Museum. The tour aims to provide new perspectives on divinity, the body, and their evolving meanings. The tour aims to simultaneously question and reaffirm personal beliefs about divinity based on one's personal experiences.

On Cover:
Gilt Bronze Mask, Liao Dynasty,
907 - 1125; Bronze, 19 x 21 cm.

NUS MUSEUM

FLOOR MAP



GILT BRONZE MASK 1

The gilt bronze mask originated from the nomadic *Khitan* tribe in Manchuria during the Liao Dynasty. High-ranking individuals were buried in metal body attire with the mask placed on the face as protection from decay. The masks were highly personalised and designed in various shapes, sizes, and materials. Bronze was used for simple designs, while silver and gold were reserved for the elite. The face symbolically hosts the human intellect, enabling humans to display a more civilised character and dominion over other living creatures.

Are specific body parts attributed greater divinity, as the *Khitan* have? Is the differentiated treatment of the deceased based on their social standing unique only to the *Khitan*?



In Bronze Room

Gilt Bronze Mask, Liao Dynasty, 907 - 1125; Bronze, 19 x 21 cm.

BRONZE MONEY TREE 2



In Bronze Room.

Money Tree (Fragment) with Ceramic Base, 25 – 220, Han, Eastern; Bronze and ceramic, 90 x 50 cm.

Money trees were commonly found in tombs in Southwest China of the Eastern Han Dynasty, which reflected the extravagant homes of their occupants. They acted as everlasting sources of prosperity and sustenance while symbolising rebirth and eternal life. This particular one consists of a bronze tree atop a ceramic base hosting human figurines in hunting and entertainment scenes while its branches feature coins, hunters and mythical beasts. The animals likely served as vehicles while the human figurines likely functioned for entertainment and accompaniment. Here, divinity is attributed to the deceased by means of service by other human and non-human bodies. Yet, class ostensibly remains a key determinant of divinity since the poorer masses could not have provided for such magnificent tombs.



PILLAR OF TOMB GATE

3

*In Fistful of Colours: Moments of
Chinese Cosmopolitanism.*

Pillar of Tomb Gate, Han, Western,
BCE 206 - CE 25; Brick, Hollow with
Impressed Decoration, 133 x 19 cm.

This pillar of a tomb gate originated from the Han Dynasty, during which the tombs emulated the homes of the living in their architecture. This pillar depicts officers clad in official attire and carrying insignias of office as well as mythical beasts amidst the backdrop of mountains. This might have reflected the typical funeral rites of the time in which a procession would send the deceased's soul to the gate of the tomb. It also echoes the earlier money tree's perception of service by other human and non-human bodies as according divine character to the deceased. Yet again, the dimension of class is evident here since such lavish burial rites and paraphernalia could only have been afforded by the nobility.

VIJAYANAGARA

4

The sculpture of the female figurine can trace its origins to a Hindu temple from the Vijayanagara Empire. She is sitting in *rajalalitasana* (royal ease) with two hands holding fans, a lower right hand in *varada mudra* (gesture of giving) and a *kendi* (water pot) on her lap while flanked by an arch and a pair of *makara* (mythological sea creature). In comparison to the service of human and non-human bodies in the money tree and pillar, what might the divine's state of idling say about their greater affordances? As part of the donations by the Government of India between 1955 and 1960 during the Cold War and the resultant non-aligned movement established by the 1955 Bandung Conference, this sculpture is a witness too to divinity curiously acting as medium and tool for political navigation and international relations.



*In Radio Malaya:
Abridged
Conversations About
Art.*

**Figurine of a
Religious Female
(Vijayanagara)**,
India, 12th - 14th
Century; Sandstone,
24.2 x 17.5 x 7cm.



5

In *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art*.

Sculpture of Buddha Muchalinda, Cambodia, 12th Century; Sandstone, 71 x 35.5 x 25 cm.

SCULPTURE OF BUDDHA MUCHALINDA

The sculpture of *Buddha Muchalinda* was donated to NUS Museum's collection by the Government of Cambodia between 1955 and 1960. The sculpture depicts Buddha sitting on *Naga Muchalinda*, a snake-like being, while performing *dhyanasana* (penance) with both hands in *dhyana mudra* (gesture of meditation). Buddha's conical crown headdress resembles those worn by the kings of Angkor, giving him the stature of a universal monarch. Both the *Vijayanagara* figurine and Buddha are currently displayed differently from their presumed origins in temples. How has the spatial and temporal context influenced their significance as divine figures? Additionally, in vivid representations of the divine through the human body, what are the implications of assigning them a specific gender?

Do male and female divine figures across cultures gravitate towards particular tropes or ideals?

The artwork *Monkey♀Thinker* by Ho Soon Yeen was first displayed in August of 1992 at an exhibition called *We Kissed*, which featured drawings, collages, and three-dimensional works by Ho Soon Yeen and Dominique Hui at The Substation. Ho described the drawing as “a parody of the traditional male-in-a-thinking posture” and chose the term “monkey” to symbolise her belief that “women are a little like circus monkeys, listening to orders from men all the time”. The artwork is surrounded by other performance-oriented art pieces and pays tribute to contemporary art discussions in Singapore from the 1970s to the 1990s. The figure's relaxed pose and direct gaze, reminiscent of the *Vijayanagara* figurine and Buddha, gives it a divine character. By interpreting the figure as ‘female’, the artwork prompts us to consider new ideas about the divine feminine.

It encourages us to question whether accepting a genderless divine, or a divinity beyond the traditional gender binary, would bring about different perspectives.

In *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art*.

Ho Soon Yeen, **Monkey♀Thinker**, 1992; Ink on paper, 127 x 96 cm.



LAKSHMI ANOINTED BY A PAIR OF ELEPHANTS

Lakshmi anointed by a pair of elephants (below) and the *Ceremonial Elephant* (right) are part of the original Teaching Collection assembled by the Museum's two pioneer curators, Michael Sullivan and William Willets. Next to each other, the juxtaposition of size and stature between human and non-human bodies is clear, alluding to their relationship in relation to the divine.

While Lakshmi is significantly larger than her accompanying elephants, what does this suggest about divinity and dominion over non-human bodies?

7



In Resource Gallery.

Lakshmi anointed by a pair of elephants, Thailand, 1971; Ceramic, 13.9 x 7.4 x 17.8 cm.

8



In Resource Gallery.

Ceremonial Elephant, Thailand, Sisatchanalai, 14th - 15th Century; Ceramic, 31 x 36.5 x 21.4 cm.

CEREMONIAL ELEPHANT

The following artefacts were acquired by Michael Sullivan between 1955 and 1960 using the Lee Kong Chian Endowment Fund. Unfortunately, there are very few records about the origins of these artefacts, as well as most of the Teaching Collection. With little to no known history it is understandable to view them with suspicion. However, does historical origin truly determine the importance of these artefacts? While it is clear that these artefacts were likely mass-produced and differ in quality from previous examples, the question remains: does scarcity or abundance elevate the importance of these artefacts? What is evident, though, is that this commercialisation of artefacts has led to their widespread availability across different social classes, ensuring their lasting significance. Our societal context has changed and adapted with modernization, and similarly, the significance of these divine artefacts must also evolve.

Tour Author
Muhammad Hariz B Emran

Editor
Ye Thu

Designer
Jasslyne Oh Jia Yinn

Additional Editorial Support
Eugene Koh
Shahira Banu
Summer Chiuh
Wardah Mohamad

Administrative Support
Nur^a Amalina Jamaludin

As a university museum, NUS Museum's mission is to actively facilitate intellectual and cultural life within and beyond the University. With a distinct focus on Asia, the Museum contributes to and facilitates the production, reception, and preservation of knowledge through collections development and curatorial practice. The Museum is a cultural hub, developing partnerships within NUS, the culture and heritage industry, and the global knowledge community. Located at the University Cultural Centre, NUS Museum comprises nine galleries and additional ancillary spaces which host a wide range of exhibitions, module collaborations and supporting programmes that contribute to the cultural and interdisciplinary conversation within NUS and beyond.



Museum

50 Kent Ridge Crescent
National University of Singapore
Singapore 119279

TELEPHONE	(+65) 6516 8817
EMAIL	museum@nus.edu.sg
WEBSITE	museum.nus.edu.sg
FACEBOOK	facebook.com/nusmuseum
INSTAGRAM	instagram.com/nusmuseum
	instagram.com/nusbabahouse
TELEGRAM	telegram.com/nusmuseumbabahouse

OPENING HOURS:

Monday: By appointment (for schools/faculties)

Tuesday to Saturday: 10:00 am – 6:00 pm

Sunday and Public Holidays: Closed

SUPPORTED BY

CULTURAL
MATCHING
FUND