



PRESS RELEASE

NUS Museum receives largest-ever donation of Straits Chinese artefacts

The collection of 577 items was donated by philanthropist Mrs Alice Tan

Singapore, 6 October 2023 — The National University of Singapore Museum (NUS Museum) has received a generous donation of 577 Straits Chinese artefacts. The collection also represents the largest collection donated to the NUS Museum by a single collector. Collected by Mrs Alice Tan over a 30-year period, the donated artefacts will contribute to a deeper study of the impact of Straits Chinese culture in Singapore and the region, and provide broadened avenues for interdisciplinary collaborations between scholars and researchers in the field.

Understanding Straits Chinese cultural heritage and history with greater depth

The collection received from Mrs Tan includes many items of **Nyonya ware** – a distinctive style of porcelain decorated with Chinese iconography produced for the Straits Chinese, particularly in the Straits settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. Dating back to the mid-19th and early-20th century, the material for *Nyonya ware* were mostly produced and ornamented in the Jiangxi Province in China for the affluent communities of Straits Chinese families, who lived in former British Straits Settlements, including Singapore.

Some of the unique *Nyonya ware* found in this collection include specially commissioned personalised bowls designed to incorporate family surnames, as well as covered jars with vibrant designs on inner and outer surfaces. The quantity and quality of *Nyonya ware* owned by these families served as a reflection of their wealth and social status within a community.

By studying the historical context surrounding the production and usage of these ceramics, academics and students can potentially acquire a more profound understanding of the social dynamics of the Straits Settlements and the lives of the Straits Chinese community. Beyond deepening our understanding of Straits Chinese material culture, the collection stands to inform research into wider topics such as the production and consumption patterns of export ceramics in global history, the diverse cultural influences within Southeast Asia that shaped the development of Chinese ceramics for Southeast Asian markets, and how the processes involved in making and caring for ceramics have evolved.

“We are very excited to expand our collection of Straits Chinese materials, and integrate this into our teaching and research endeavours,” said Ms Rie Ong, Assistant Curator at NUS Museum, who also leads the museum’s faculty engagement efforts. “It is an invaluable addition that will not only deepen our appreciation of the Straits Chinese community’s artistic traditions, but also help enthuse and educate our students of even broader topics. Undoubtedly, the collection presents new opportunities for us to engage students from diverse fields of study and facilitate the advancement of their research specialisations.”

A legacy of educational philanthropy

Mrs Tan is no stranger to philanthropy, and her donation of artefacts is the latest in a long line of the Tan family’s philanthropic contributions to education in Singapore. This includes Tan Kim Seng’s pioneering work in establishing schools in the mid-1800s, as well as Tan Jiak Kim’s personal fund-raising and contributions to setting up a medical school in Singapore - which grew to become the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. Most recently, Mrs Tan and

her late spouse Mr Peter Tan provided a generous donation in 2013 to support needy students, and various academic programmes across NUS.

Describing the collection as her “baby”, Mrs Tan expressed her hopes that the collection would help enrich and deepen the study of Straits Chinese culture in Singapore and the region, and benefit future generations of students and academics.

“We are deeply grateful to Mrs Alice Tan for her generous donation, which will play a pivotal role in helping us better understand how Straits Chinese culture, heritage and identity have evolved over time,” said Mr Ahmad Mashadi, University Curator at NUS Museum. “We look forward to integrating these artefacts into our ongoing academic collaborations, and believe these artefacts will provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Straits Chinese history and heritage for NUS students. We hope this will enrich our students’ learning experience beyond the traditional classroom setting.”

The artefacts are presently being prepared for display at NUS Museum, with a dedicated exhibition slated for the end of 2023, accompanied by the launch of a commemorative publication documenting the collection.

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About National University of Singapore (NUS)

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is Singapore's flagship university, which offers a global approach to education, research and entrepreneurship, with a focus on Asian perspectives and expertise. We have 16 colleges, faculties and schools across three campuses in Singapore, with more than 40,000 students from 100 countries enriching our vibrant and diverse campus community. We have also established more than 20 NUS Overseas Colleges entrepreneurial hubs around the world.

Our multidisciplinary and real-world approach to education, research and entrepreneurship enables us to work closely with industry, governments and academia to address crucial and complex issues relevant to Asia and the world. Researchers in our faculties, research centres of excellence, corporate labs and more than 30 university-level research institutes focus on themes that include energy; environmental and urban sustainability; treatment and prevention of diseases; active ageing; advanced materials; risk management and resilience of financial systems; Asian studies; and Smart Nation capabilities such as artificial intelligence, data science, operations research and cybersecurity.

For more information on NUS, please visit www.nus.edu.sg.

About NUS Museum

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.

For more information about NUS Museum, visit museum.nus.edu.sg/

About NUS Baba House

Built around 1895, 157 Neil Road is a three-storey townhouse located in Singapore's historic district of Blair Plain. Once the ancestral home of a Peranakan Chinese family, namely the Wee family, the property was acquired by the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2006 with funds donated by Ms Agnes Tan in memory of her late father Tun Tan Cheng Lock, a Malaysian businessman and community leader.

In 2007, a project was undertaken to restore 157 Neil Road for presentation as a heritage house which contextualises Peranakan Chinese material culture and aesthetics within a domestic setting. The interior setting takes visitors on an experiential trip into a Peranakan Chinese family home of the early 20th century. [NUS Museum](#), [NUS Department of Architecture](#), the [Urban Redevelopment Authority](#) and [The Peranakan Association of Singapore](#) were the main partners in the conservation project. The house opened in September 2008, and was named NUS Baba House. NUS Baba House is presently managed by [NUS Museum](#).

For more information about NUS Baba House, visit babahouse.nus.edu.sg

Annex A – Photos and Captions



Pictured above is a selection of kamcheng with a rich variety of decorative designs, from the Alice and Peter Tan Collection. Among them, the most prominent is the green centerpiece (last row, centre), towering at 38 cm and adorned with four ogival panels, two gracing the body of the jar and two adorning the lid, featuring exquisite illustrations of phoenixes. The ones on the body depict mythical birds in flight, while those on the cover showcase them perched gracefully upon a rock.



Another unique selection from the Alice and Peter Tan Collection, these blue ground ceramics feature intricate white designs set against a deep midnight-blue enamel backdrop on items such as oval footed trays, kamcheng, chupu, teapots, wine warmers,

teacups, cricket boxes, melon seed boxes, and a milk jug. Interwoven with these designs are auspicious symbols, including bats and the Chinese character 'shou' for happiness and longevity.



Set against a turquoise backdrop, the magpie takes centre stage in the decorative theme of this selection of ceramics which includes a kamcheng, a pair of mirror-image vases, a teapot and teacups. Perched gracefully on a branch, the magpie shares space with lush wisteria vines, vibrant purple blooms and tendrils spiralling in every direction.

[Click here to download the photographs.](#)