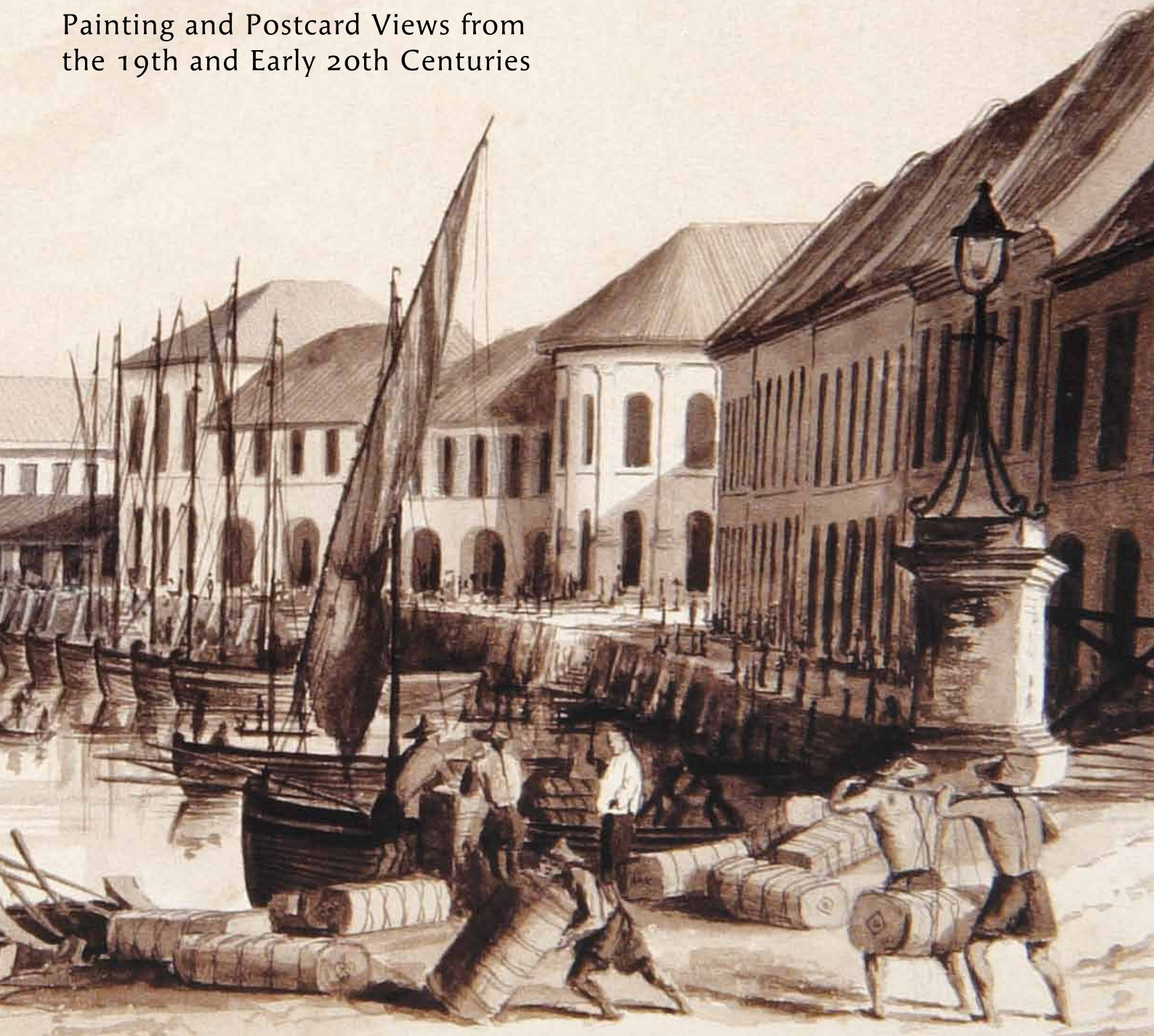


Capturing the Straits



Painting and Postcard Views from
the 19th and Early 20th Centuries



Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Official opening 8 February 2012

Acknowledgements

NUS Museum would like to thank the following persons and organisations for their support of the exhibition and for making the reprints of postcards possible:

A/P Wong Yunn Chii (Dr), Head, NUS Department of Architecture

Mr Philip Tay, Project Manager, NUS Department of Architecture

Prof. Emeritus Cheah Jin Seng

Mr Lim Kheng Chye

Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore

Published by

NUS MUSEUM

University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent
National University of Singapore
Singapore 119279

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Cover: Charles Dyce, *The River from Monkey Bridge* (detail), 1842-43, Watercolour & ink on paper



Foreword

Ahmad Mashadi
Head, NUS Museum

Charles Dyce (1816-1853) arrived in Singapore from Calcutta in 1842. He worked initially as an assistant in his brother's trading firm, later served as a member of the grand jury, and for a brief period before leaving Singapore around 1847, as Sheriff of the Straits Settlements. As an amateur artist, he sketched scenes of the settlements. His landscapes were typical, from harbours and waterfronts, to vistas that featured homesteads and natural scenes. It was a significant period not only in the context of increasing British influence over Malaya, but also ways in which scientific approaches were systematically deployed in the accumulation of information and knowledge of lands newly encountered and settled.

Bernard Smith, in his seminal publication "European Vision and the South Pacific" accounted the transformation of English 18th century thought and the significant role of the Royal Society in appealing to "travelers, virtuosi, and scientists to observe carefully, record accurately, and to experiment." Artists and draughtsman, including those traveling alongside South Pacific explorers such as Cook and Banks, while schooled in the neo-classical approach of depicting nature in its idealized form and sense of unity, became engaged with scientific principles of empirical research. Habits of observation informed attempts in which

rocks, plants, animals, people and atmospheric conditions were depicted. Remarkable of their attempts to capture the geography and the vegetation that typify the East Indies, the works of Dyce may be located within this general shift towards the empirical. Yet, placed within the broader history of colonial encounters, artworks, alongside other forms of visual documentations, operate within complex processes of colonial expansion and consolidation. Accompanying the sketches, Dyce's manuscript remarked on his attempts to illuminate on the significant progress of Singapore as a port settlement engaged in commerce. He tasked the sketches to demonstrate to those in the "Fader-land" of the remarkable developments taking place in the Straits, and to those that left the Straits for home, of the "scenes and remembrance of days gone by". Dyce sought to affirm Singapore and the Straits Settlement as sites of order and mastery where colonial interests for commerce and industry may be sustained and advanced, and at the same time, to evoke the very poetics that promote emotional engagement with these lands.

For the purpose of the exhibition "Capturing the Straits", curator Foo Su Ling placed, alongside the selection of reproductions of sketches by Dyce, a series of postcard reproductions featuring the historic settlement of Malacca.

These postcards were produced commercially around the turn of the 20th century and after. Steamships that accommodated trade had also encouraged mass travel. The camera and photographic print had become commonplace. Postcards became emblematic to colonial travel, they aid to account what was seen or experienced, or at least, what was meant to be seen or experienced, so as to hold in evidence a sojourner's account. Walter Benjamin regarded the ubiquity of photography, within the emerging new age of mechanical reproduction, for its ability to transmit and reify perspectives and ideas. Bereft of aura, the very politics that reside within the image is laid bare. Resplendent with orientalist bodies, the colonial postcard here becomes a record of the 'savage' in which the Saidian colonial venture may be referenced to. Yet in postcards, the very act of inscribing makes complex the image and its caption. To inscribe, to personalize, and to inflect, is to reintroduce the image to a range of subjectivities, out of which perhaps the singularity of the colonial project dissipates to give way to individuated predicaments.

Collectively, Dyce's images and the postcards, perhaps cannot be held as a cogent document that insists on a totalizing function of image making to the colonial project – i.e. to survey, to describe, to naturalize the simultaneous

acts of civilizing and dispossessing. Perhaps, one may seek within these images, as part of a broader index of visual documents produced during colonial Malaya, ways in which theoretical frameworks may address the social and historical ramifications of the colonial image and its functions.

The Baba House and the NUS Museum wish to thank Associate Professor Wong Yunn Chii for his valuable assistance in the initiation of this project and Mr Philip Tay for his assistance in providing the images. The postcards were reproduced with the kind permission of collectors Professor Emeritus Cheah Jin Seng and Mr Lim Kheng Chye, and for this we are greatly indebted.

Constructing the Colonial Landscape: A Curatorial Introduction

Foo Su Ling

The exhibition *Capturing the Straits: Painting and Postcard Views from the 19th and Early 20th Centuries* brings together paintings of the Straits Settlements¹ by Scotsman Charles Andrew Dyce who lived in Singapore between 1842 and 1847, and picture postcards of Malacca dating from 1900 to 1957. Referencing the assembly of visual materials, this essay examines image making in Malaya within the transformative setting of colonial expansion and consolidation. The discussion includes aspects of pictorial production in relation to conventions of representation, and develops contexts within which such images may be set alongside one another to stimulate a range of discourses.

Completed across different periods utilising differing technologies, the two sets of materials are distinct. They were produced about five decades apart and collectively span almost a century. This lapse of time provides an ample interval for a meaningful observation of the changes and continuities in colonial interactions with the region from the early decades of European expedition to much later years when their understanding and perceptions had deepened and reached some degree of consolidation. Presented at the NUS Baba House, a residential unit built and actively inhabited in the colonial period, these visual sources provide glimpses into the nature of urban transformations and the social settings in which communities in the Straits lived and interacted.

Drawn from NUS Museum's collection, the works of Charles Dyce record his impressions of the Straits and Batavia. As a young man of eighteen, Dyce left home in Aberdeen for Calcutta and took up employment as an assistant in the trading company R.C. Jenkins, Fergusson, Brothers & Co. (Lim 2003: 10). In 1842, he arrived in Singapore where he worked at Martin, Dyce & Co., a trading concern in which his brother was a partner. Dyce enjoyed an active life in Singapore involving himself socially in the expatriate community and participating in the civic affairs of the town (Lim 2003: 13). He served as a member of the grand jury from 1843 to 1846 and, for a year from 29 September 1846, was Sheriff of the Straits Settlements. He was also an amateur artist; the collection has a notable

number of sketches of Singapore and a few of Batavia, Malacca and Penang which Dyce made while visiting these towns. These sketches chiefly document the colonial settlements and locations accessible to a typical traveller. In an accompanying manuscript, he elaborated on several locations depicted in his paintings and described other aspects of the Straits which he did not capture visually.

The postcards are selected from an earlier exhibition *Historic Malacca Postcards* curated by Wong Yunn Chii. Presented at NUS' Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre for Asian Architecture and Urban Heritage in Malacca, it featured over a hundred images of the historic settlement that captivated colonial travellers. Postcards were first issued in the Straits Settlements in 1879 and had become a profitable commercial undertaking by 1900 (Tan 1986: 6, 8). They were originally conceptualised as standalone pieces which offered a quick and easy means of communication but the cards soon became popular as collectibles prompting manufacturers to introduce them in different series. Wong (2011: 13) observes that the postcard trade was an early example of a globalised enterprise where stages in the production process – photography, printing, marketing, sales – may involve individuals or entities of



varying nationalities in geographically separate locations. Singapore enjoyed a monopoly on the postcard business owing to its position as the administrative centre of the Straits and a hub for travel into other parts of British Malaya.

Paintings such as those by Dyce are conditioned by itinerancy, a sense of adventure, opportunity and service, and are significant for their reference to European artistic conventions in landscape painting. They also point towards the deployment of image making in fostering the regard and understanding of colonised spaces as extensions of the colonial administrative, philosophical, scientific, economic and touristic spheres.

Dyce's works may be referenced to the emerging popularity of the Picturesque in Britain around the late 18th century. As a pictorial convention, it departs from classical European artistic traditions which privileged man, his activities and achievements. In constructing the Picturesque, the landscape is the object of focus; human beings and their built structures are integrated into the wider scenery and 'seem to peek within the overall landscape of vegetation, forest and agricultural fields' (Savage 2004: 8). The emergence of this pictorial schema has been attributed



Charles Dyce, *Cairnhill, Singapore*, 1842, Watercolour & ink on paper, 263 x 363 mm

to a nostalgic longing for the shrinking countryside and disappearing rural lifestyle as industrialisation and urbanisation became a prevalent facet of British life. In Picturesque constructions of the landscape, man's triumph over the natural environment is secondary to the notion of an Arcadian world where he exists in harmony with nature. The pronounced rolling hills in the plantation scene of *Cairnhill, Singapore* are reminiscent of Britain's rural topography. Shrubs and the scatter of trees spot the landscape and weaving through the vast estate is a driveway leading to the country house, a quintessential feature of the British countryside. The bright tones of the sky suggest fine weather and a pleasant day for riding over the hills and across the dales. In this painting too, Dyce attempted to faithfully observe and record the foliage

of the tropics. Carefully placed within an ordered and domesticated space, framing the centrality of the country house, they are significant both as subject and context, to infer a geography quite different to that of his intended audience in Britain, and to celebrate colonial knowledge and industry as a transformative and productive force.

As such, these landscapes are 'realities' emerging from the artist's simultaneous engagement with observing and claiming authorial vision, but mediated by evolving concepts of image making and wider colonial ideas of progress through scientific advancement and mastery of the physical environment.

The appeal of the Picturesque did not elude postcard



Malay Kampong (Village) Malacca, Undated

makers and it was in the tropical countryside that they found subject matters suited to such representations. The native village was regarded with fascination and in the visual language of these images, prevailing conventions of British landscape paintings are observed. Wong (2011: 48) notes that while the village and its homesteads were places of human habitation, photographers prioritised the picturesque intent of built forms and landscape over human beings. On occasions, human subjects were known to have been removed from the shots and in other instances views were captured in a way that both humans and houses ‘melt into the thickness of the tropical groves’.

The padi field was another object of the tourist gaze. Green expanses greeted visitors as they journeyed by road or rail through Malaya; at times, railway lines traversed through the rice fields ‘enveloping the traveller in the experience’ (Wong 2011: 20). The view so delighted one traveller that he described it as ‘a tropical paradise picture which will doubtless delight the heart of many an artist in days to come...’ (quoted in Wong 2011: 20). Such visual impressions were packaged as postcards and as their circulation increased in the Western world, the collective imagination of the tropical arcadia was constructed.

Postcards, mechanically produced to serve an emergent tourist economy, are conspicuous by the fixities of their subject matter – famous scenes, notable buildings, exotic indigenes. Postcard manufacturers assemble such images ‘in relation to one another to form an account, a narrative, a



Workman Ploughing Padi (Padi Fields) Malacca, 1909

portrayal... [inviting] the viewer to participate in a rehearsed way, various stereotyped visual schema’ (Wong 2011: 15). However, one may acknowledge that such ‘participation’ was not passive, being subjected to pliancy and open to individuated use. Meanings are generated through acts of purchase, personalised inscriptions, delivery and receipt, and repeated viewings across distance and over time. The manufacturer’s printed image and caption are but initiating elements that await interventions that appropriate and transform the original.

While the drawings and the postcards are distinct by their modes of production, volume, access, and distribution, they may collectively be seen as forms of ‘reportage’ that aim to provide accounts of the colonised space as it is being comprehended, envisioned and transformed. This ‘reportage’ is in part mediated by adapting the popular visual language of the Picturesque to simultaneously invoke similarities and contrasts against the referent - the idealised English landscapes. It also takes the form of an index of places, dwellings and buildings, and peoples to describe the encounters and achievements of colonial residents in the distant realms of the empire. These narratives are reified through consumption of the images by the colonial audience.



Charles Dyce, *The Town and the Roadstead from Government Hill*, 1842-47, Watercolour & ink on paper, 353 x 514 mm

Order and Progress

Comprehension and mastery of the region is made evident through classifications and rationalisation of spaces, and imposed change. Two types of compositions are discussed in this section, the first involving images depicting vistas of the colonised town from an elevated position. To command an expansive, unobstructed view is widely connected with having status and power. In the modern context, '[t]he view is an important part of the behaviour setting for corporate decision-making; executives are often shown gazing out [of the corporate tower] while talking or thinking' (Dovey 1999: 115). This 'executive gaze' is exemplified in Dyce's *The Town and the Roadstead from Government Hill*. The high vantage point places the viewers, in this case the

three Europeans on the hill, in a position not unlike a lord overseeing the country under his rule (McApin, citing Fabricant, 1997: 24) or an executive gazing out at the view from his office in a skyscraper.

From their location on the hill, the men in Dyce's sketch are surveying the neatly ordered town beneath where rows of buildings are connected by roads and bridges. The volume of traffic along the quayside and in the river, and the count of ships out at sea, are indications that the town is bustling with activity. Lim (2003: 35) proposes that such a viewpoint can be seen as a celebratory report on the progress of the settlement under colonial management. In this regard,



Charles Dyce, *Government Hill from the New Harbour Road, Singapore*, 1844, Watercolour & ink on paper, 272 x 448 mm

we are further informed by Dyce's manuscript recording his appraisal of the achievements resulting from capable British leadership:

The Roads through out the Island are extensive and generally good and, thanks to the Governor are being carried into every corner of it... (Lim 2003: 96)

... [The Free School] was built by subscription in which Government were liberal donors and is now supported through the same means. It is at this time in a more flourishing condition through the exertions of the Governor and his Lady who have since their arrival in

the settlement, shown a very great interest in this as well as all other institutions on the Island. (Lim 2003: 89)

Depictions of architectural contrasts can be read as a comparison of progress. The juxtaposition of native and colonial structures in the tropical landscape forms the second type of imageries for our discussion. In Dyce's sketches, an example being *Government Hill from the New Harbour Road, Singapore*, buildings of Western design, whether serving civic, commercial or residential interests, take on a prominent form; they are concrete structures, firmly rooted to the ground, and sport an almost regimental



Charles Dyce, *Singapore from Sandy Point*, 1842-47, Watercolour & ink on paper, 357 x 516 mm



Charles Dyce, *Batu Blair or Sail Rock, Old Straits of Singapore*, 1846, Watercolour & ink on paper, 290 x 464 mm

uniformity of archways, windows and colonnades. Alongside these facades, the native huts in *Singapore from Sandy Point* and *Batu Blair or Sail Rock, Old Straits of Singapore* stand out in their rudimentary configuration and temporary disposition. Dyce articulates his thoughts on the two architectural styles as he journeys through Georgetown in Penang:

... alas! every turn leading from Georgetown, displays those unequivocal signs of decay in the shape of ruined and broken down gateways, with avenues of fine trees leading up to what may at one time have been an elegant mansion, but are now occupied by some wretched native huts probably built out of the old materials as many had part of european manufacture mixed up most

incongruously with their bamboo wicker work and attap matting_ (Lim 2003: 115)

Despite its dilapidation, the mansion grounds managed to conjure in Dyce's mind a contrasting impression to the native habitat in aesthetics, dignity, engineering sophistication and quality. Inherent in such depictions of architectural contrast is the Westerner's perception of disparity in civilisation between Europe and the Straits, and the potential advancements that colonisation could secure for the latter. Scientific and technological advancements in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries drove rational and pragmatic thinking as part of Western culture and 'provided the underpinnings for the developing consciousness that people could control their social and natural environments



Flag' Staff & old Fortress-Malacca, c. 1910

for the improvement of the material and social conditions of life' (Savage 1984: 21). Arising from these 'innovative, assertive and technological aspects of Western culture in the nineteenth century' was the conviction that 'the march of civilisation demanded expansion into new geographical horizons'.

Flag' Staff & old Fortress-Malacca is an example of a postcard view which conveys colonial order and an air of civility in the British settlement of Malacca. Three gentlemen pose for the camera in the foreground; the civilised culture from which they originate is suggested by their smart attire and the air of confidence. In the midground stands Dutch-period houses and government buildings which '[d]espite their dilapidated condition... would have commanded a

sense of order and austere composition of a European townscape' (Wong 2011: 120). St. Pauls Hill rises in the background on which a flag has been raised; 'as the highest vantage point of the town, this is a natural location for the display of sovereignty'.



The Malay Mosque, Malacca, c. 1910

Collective Imaginings on Colonial Malaya

As a popular medium of mass production and consumption, postcards facilitated means in which conceptions are disseminated and reinforced. While the postcard views reveal a measure of colonial accomplishments through portrayals of infrastructural progress – landing steps, piers, resthouse – and administrative order, the field of view is less expansive. Postcard views are framed to capture a specific point of interest either by focusing on one object or a grouping which enhances the presentation of the chosen subject matter. Greater attention is given to the local populace, their cultural and economic activities, enclaves, religious sites and habitats (examples include *The Malay Mosque, Malacca* and *Kampong Pantai, Malacca*). This shift in emphasis can be understood in relation to the evolving interests of Europeans visiting the tropics. While early interactions were mainly of a commercial and political

nature, Europeans who came to the Straits in the late 19th century included individuals with an interest in collecting anthropological, scientific and historical information (McAlpin 1997: 27). The turn of the century also witnessed an increase in tourists whose primary concern was to experience the sights, sounds and tastes of the distant colonies.

Dyce produced his sketches as a leisure activity but he did have in mind a specific following, namely Europeans residing in the Straits or those who had formerly lived in the region and had returned to their homelands (Lim 2003: 86). His depictions reflect a more personal encounter with local spaces and places, with subjectivities defined by his capacity as a member of the expatriate community. For his intended audience of grassroots administrators



Kampong Pantai Road, Malacca, 1935

and entrepreneurs providing political, administrative and commercial management in the colonies, the expansive views surveying the island from a variety of vantage points were not foreign.

In the case of postcards, the target group was tourists; the selection of images was therefore guided by what would have 'market appeal' to consumers vacationing in the Straits as well as the recipients to whom these visual materials were sent. As Wong (2011: 51) observes, the choice of images was 'predicated upon their popularity as sites for visit; with the uniqueness of the views, coming in as a close second. ...The picturesque character rather than the documentation value occupied the commercial eye of the photographer and editorial savvy of the publisher'. While views promoting the rich opportunities for sightseeing

served the capitalistic ambitions of postcard producers, it was also in their commercial interest to favour images that could shape a collective perception that the Straits was a friendly destination and despite its foreign setting, offered a welcoming environment to the Western visitor.

Life in the tropics presented contrasting experiences and sentiments for Europeans. While a glamorous lifestyle of sprawling residences, grand hotels and social gatherings is epitomised in cinematic and literary depictions, the unfamiliar tropical climate, living conditions and natural environment proved to be challenging at times and even traumatic in some cases. George L. Peet who came to Singapore in 1923 and joined the Straits Times as a junior reporter believed that his adaption to the tropics was hampered by his psychological reactions to the sanitary



The Stadt House, Malacca, Undated

facilities at the boarding house where he put up:

... Those bathrooms were dark and dank, and the cement floor was always slippery, an ideal breeding ground for the fungus known as ‘Singapore foot’. There was a lattice board on which to stand in the hope of escaping this infection... but in spite of all precautions one was hardly ever free from the itching between the toes caused by ‘Singapore foot’...

In the corner of the bathroom stood the *jamban* [Malay term for toilet]... With about a dozen boarders on that upper floor, and the *jambans* emptied by the Municipality’s nightsoil coolies once every 24 hours, the sanitary arrangements were indescribably primitive and disgusting... (Waterson 1998: 304)

The Westerner’s perception of the tropics was also marred by threats of losing life and belongings to bandits, and attacks by ferocious and poisonous creatures in the tropical forests (Savage 1984: 267). Ravages caused by tigers were most widely feared, being prevalent in both urban and rural areas. Song, a Straits-born Chinese reported:

At this time (1843) Singapore was more than ever before infested with tigers. It was reported that not a day passed without one man being killed : not only Chinese engaged in planting in the country were attacked, but

people on the New Harbour Road, or not far from Sepoy Lines, or on Mr. Balestier’s sugar plantation on Balestier Plain fell victims these wild beasts. ... The Government reward of \$50 for every tiger brought to the police station, whether alive or dead, was increased to \$100 and later to \$150. (Song 1984: 60)

Appleton (1975: 68) remarks that human beings are instinctively aware of their physical environment; ‘they experience pleasure and satisfaction [from the environment] when it seems to be conducive to the realization of their biological needs and a sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction when it does not’. It can be argued that imageries of the Straits were composed with an awareness of such concerns; the subject matter and viewpoints were astutely selected to afford a sense of assurance that while the tropics was foreign, European intrusion was neither uncommon nor unwelcomed and consequently the unfamiliar landscape could be approached with enthusiasm, not trepidation.

Postcard views include an even wider array of European innovations implanted on the tropical landscape – the British flag on the hill, automobiles, and telecommunication facilities (see *The Stadt House, Malacca*). Applying Appleton’s theory on symbolism in landscape paintings, these contraptions can be regarded as symbols of refuge (Appleton 1975: 101), imparting to the European audience the idea that shelter and assistance were available when needed. As a symbol of refuge, *The Rest House* was perhaps one of the most potent for travellers. Wong (2011: 33) discloses that in the colonies, these sanctuaries ‘were understood as islands of secret pleasures with the objects and indulgences familiar to the Europeans, with the “grimness” of the tropics removed’. They offered ‘entertainment and refrigeration... , fresh water supply, and sanitary standards, communications and electric lighting... [and] the gentility of a center room that was used as a library...’.

Images of celebrations in honour of the British monarch’s coronation, and those of monuments dedicated to British royalty, functioned like emblems declaring the local population’s support for the Crown. The Queen Victoria Memorial Fountain sited next to the clock tower



The Rest House Malacca, 1938/48

commemorating Malacca philanthropist Tan Beng Swee (*Victoria Monument & Clock Tower Malacca*) makes a potent statement in conveying the notion of British rulers being accepted alongside local heroes. Under such congenial conditions, there was every reason for the European visitor to feel encouraged and optimistic about a sojourn in the region.

These preliminary observations are limited based on a small sampling Charles Dyce's works and the postcards selected as well as the modest objectives of the exhibition. The width and depth of visual documents of the colonial period that include maps, topographical records, natural history drawings, illustrations and photographs will undoubtedly reveal a colonial worldview responsive to diverse encounters and interactions. This curatorial introduction provides a limited perspective through which the drawings of Dyce and the postcards of colonial Malaya may be approached and read, looking into themes relating to visual order and the colonial vision, and consumption as a basis of the articulation and reification of such vision. Distinction between the two sets of materials may be defined by their various modes of production and circulation. Yet collectively, they may be seen as part of a visual index of colonial Malaya, focused in large parts on landscapes that described shifting conditions and transformations during the 19th and early 20th centuries.



Victoria Monument & Clock Tower, Malacca, c. 1930

Foo Su Ling is a curator at NUS Museum. Her projects include *Working the Tropical Garden* (2010); *Materializing the Figure* (2010); *Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Light on Old Pottery* (2009). In her administrative and curatorial capacities at the Baba House, she has also initiated and curated a number of projects including *Of Fingerbowls & Hankies: Chris Yap voyeurs through the Baba House* (2009).

Endnotes:

¹ The Straits Settlements was a grouping comprising Singapore, Malacca and Penang under British rule from 1826 to 1946. In this essay, the Straits Settlements is also referred to as the Straits.

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NUS Baba House

A gift from Ms Agnes Tan to the National University of Singapore, the NUS Baba House was officially opened in September 2008. Once the ancestral home of a Straits Chinese family, it is now conceived as a heritage house which facilitates appreciation, reflection and research into the Straits Chinese history and culture. This is articulated primarily through the reconstruction of a domestic space characterised by the architectural conservation of the shophouse, and restoration of interiors including furnishing, household materials and decorative features. Research, conservation and restoration were undertaken in partnership with NUS' Department of Architecture and Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The first and second floors of the Baba House reference the community's material culture during the first half of the 20th century. The third floor hosts temporary exhibitions, encouraging academic researchers and art practitioners to explore fresh perspectives into an evolving discourse on the Straits Chinese, and to develop insights into cultural encounters, hybridity and their contemporary implications. Baba House is also a unique resource for the study of architectural traditions, conservation efforts and urban developments in Singapore.



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Visits to the exhibition only (3rd floor) are free and By Appointment.

Visits to the 1st and 2nd floors are By Appointment Only. Visitors are required to sign up in advance for a heritage tour.

NUS Baba House is managed by NUS Museum, an institution of NUS Centre For the Arts

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