Annual General Meeting ...

The Annual General Meeting on 6 August was held at a new venue this year. The Society was invited to hold its meeting at the Singapore Philatelic Museum in Coleman Street. Many of our members will remember the building as the Methodist Bookshop. It is now transformed with memorabilia, including a scooter which was used by postmen, proudly displayed along with the stamps.

The meeting was called to order at 5.30pm but as there was no quorum it was adjourned until 6pm when Mr Kwa Chong Guan, Vice President, asked members to be seated, as the meeting could now commence.

There were no amendments to last year’s minutes and the meeting quickly proceeded to the President’s Report on the year’s activities.

President’s Report
“We have had an interesting year with a number of occasions to mark. Our latest publication, “What If, Post-War Choices in Singapore” was launched on 12 September by the late Mr David Marshall in the Surrender Chamber as part of the commemorations of the 50th Anniversary of the end of WWII in the Pacific, organized by the MITA. It was well attended by members, guests and many veterans from overseas, who had come to remember their comrades in those momentous days. It was a moving experience to read the dedications and thoughts written in the visitors book by many survivors of that terrible conflict.

Last year I mentioned we would publish by year-end, the papers of our Seminar - “Our Place in Time” which is edited by Committee Member, Dr Kwok Kian Woon.

Unfortunately, due to various problems this has now been postponed until later this year. I would like to acknowledge, with thanks, the partial sponsorship of this publication by the Shaw Foundation.

We have a very exciting publication schedule for the next year so as we are publishing David Marshall’s letters which he wrote from China whilst there as Singapore’s Chief Minister in the mid-50’s. He met Chou En Lai, amongst others, and these letters are his impressions of the prominent personalities and the country at that time. We must thank the Lee Foundation for their generous sponsorship of this publication. You will all be invited to the launch next month.

At the request of the STPB we have formed a small ad hoc committee with Tan Hock Beng, Lee Weng Choy and Committee members, Dr Kwok Kian Woon, Richard Ho and myself, to discuss “Cultural tourism”. We subsequently met our STPB counterpart and the Chairman, Tun Chin Nam for lunch to discuss our findings.

From this arose the support for a new project which is being formulated at this moment. It is the launch of a pamphlet series which will cover many aspects of Singapore’s heritage. The first two will have Chinatown as their theme, one of which will be based on Geraldene Lowe’s famous walks and the other on the Buildings in Chinatown and their changing uses over time. The STPB has agreed, in principle, to sponsor the two publications and we hope this will be the start of a continuing series with a new pamphlet every few months.

Finally, on the book front, due to the continuing demand for “Living Legacy; Singapore’s Architectural Heritage Renewed”, we have decided on a reprint.

We have not been idle on other fronts and once more we have been asked to sit on the URA Annual Heritage Awards and recently I have been appointed Chairman of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital History Committee.

At the beginning of May the AA Asia held a Workshop entitled “Contemporary Use of the Vernacular”. The Workshop discussed the conflicting cultures of east and west and the affect this has on the arts and architecture, particularly in the Asian emerging countries. Dr Chua Beng Chua and Dr Kwok Kian Woon were invited to be commentators.

Our Treasurer, Ms Boey Yut Mei, represented the Society at the Nara Symposium in October, last year, which was organized by the Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation. She will be giving you a brief impression later on this evening.

* Continue on Pages 2

OFFICE BEARERS

Although there was no election this year we are pleased to welcome two new members to our Committee, which now comprises:

Mr William Lim Siew Wai
Chairman

Dr Kwok Kian Woon
Vice-President

Mr William Sim Juay Cheow
Hon. Treasurer

Ms Boey Yut Mei
Hon. Secretary

Ms Geraldene Lowe
Mr Kwa Chong Guan
Mr Mok Wei Wei
Mr Richard Ho
Mr Robert Powell
Ms Sharon Siddique

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Annual General Meeting ...

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One other activity which I mentioned last year was the forthcoming seminar on the “Chinese speaking Community in Singapore from the 50's to the 70's”. We discovered that Hwa Chong Alumni was organizing something similar which was held on 28 July. We, therefore, have decided to hold our seminar/study until a later date. It may be a bi-lingual affair which would make it a first for the Society.

Richard Ho, an architect and Committee Member, has identified an area of our heritage which needs urgent attention. This is the conservation of the post-war buildings in Singapore, which at the moment are at the mercy of the wrecker’s ball.

To address this deficiency a Committee, which he will head, is being set up to identify such buildings, with the eventual objective to present it to the authorities.

Turning now to our social activities, as promised last year, we have had one major event which was held in conjunction with Chinese New Year and Hari Raya which coincided this year. This was held at Azizah’s and we were treated to a very varied menu celebrating the two festivals. It was extremely successful.

The Hindu festival of Deepavali was marked by a walk with Geraldene around little India with dinner at a nearby restaurant, after which many adjourned to the temple to see the dancing which is part of Navaratri. We collaborated with the Culture Society for this event as well as a tea to meet a sculptress and painter and a talk on colonial furniture. Earlier this year there was the early morning walk for Thaipusam which Geraldene stoically put together.

We do need more social activities. Anyone who has an interesting idea or feels like helping organize an activity can contact our secretary, Win Ramdas, for assistance”.

The members then discussed the accounts. Mr Kwa Chong Guan spoke of the healthy state of the Society which was explained by the royalties we have been receiving from the sales of “Living Legacy” which is now going into a second printing. Ms Boey Yut Mei then asked why the financial year was only eleven months. Mr Kwa explained that at the last Annual General Meeting, a motion was passed to alter the financial year to bring it into line with the National Arts Council, with whom the Society now has an account which enables our sponsors to receive tax exemption. The motion was introduced on the advice of our accountants, Price Waterhouse. The accountants were retained as our honorary auditors.

Ms Boey Yut Mei gave a brief synopsis of her trip to Nara, Japan, representing the Society. Her report appears on page 3.

Committee members then elaborated on projects which had been touched upon in the President’s report. Mr Mok Wei Wei explained to members why the seminar on the Chinese-speaking community had been postponed and the likely date to be early next year. Dr Kwok Kian Woon spoke of the problems which have resulted in the delay in publication of the papers of the Seminar, “Our Place in Time”. Mr Richard Ho was called upon, by the President, to give more information on his project of a Post-War Buildings Inventory.

The meeting concluded with Mrs Boey Yut Mei speaking of the Asia & West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation meeting in Jogjakarta in September. Dr Kwok Kian Woon asked for a student membership category with a lower subscription. The President said this would be considered by the Committee.

The meeting was then adjourned as there was no other business and members were invited to the Museum lobby for refreshments, where much discussion took place.

NEW MEMBERS

Richard Ho
Loke Hip Meng, Tommy
Sylvia S H Tan

CORPORATE

KKS Industrial and Marketing Pte Ltd

Pamphlet Series

For some time now the Committee has been toying with the idea of a pamphlet series. After much deliberation and discussion the project has been formalized. It will be co-ordinated by Mr Lee Weng Choy.

The purpose is to serve a vital public education function by promoting interest and appreciation of Singapore's heritage and history. The text will, most often, draw upon existing published material but re-packaged into a convenient, concise, booklet size of about 50 pages. The topics can be loosely categorized into 1) nature, 2) built environment, 3) written, 4) lifestyle, 5) arts and culture, 6) miscellaneous histories.

The target audience includes students, tourists as well as the general public. The intent is not to provide exhaustive information on the topic but rather to whet the appetite. An appendix will give additional information for those who wish to further their interest.

It is envisaged there will be 4-8 titles published annually with a print run of 5-15,000 depending on the topic. The retail cost will be between $6-8. Each pamphlet will be sponsored by an organization. There are many topics and the series promises to be one of the most exciting, as well as far-reaching projects the Society has ever undertaken. It is hoped that the first pamphlet will be on sale in a few months.
The Fourth Symposium of the Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation (AWPNAC) was held in Nara, an historic area in Nara, Japan, from 27-30 October 1995.

The theme was "Succession and Development of Historical Streets and Living Culture of Shophouses for the Future". The programme was well-balanced with intellectual and social activities.

On the first day there was a guided tour around Naramachi to familiarise the delegates with the city. The group gathered at the newly conserved century old house called "Naramachi Monogatari-kan" (house of the Stories of Nara Town) in the Gangoji neighbourhood. This shophouse was a liquor and tobacco shop formerly.

The Monogatari-kan is planned as a centre for providing information to anyone repairing and improving old houses with the aim of "promoting community development to make the best use of the area's history, tradition and culture". Funds for the conservation come from public subsidies, private and corporate donations.

The tour then moved to the Gangoji temple and another shophouse which is presently under renovation.

Ms Yosino Oishi, a photo-journalist, gave the Commemoratative Lecture on the second day. This was entitled "Fifty years after the end of World War II: Rethinking relationship with Asia". Reports were given by the participants including Ms Boey Yut Mei, on behalf of the Society. She also presented our publication "Living Legacy" by Robert Powell to the Naramachi Centre President, Mr Katsuakira Kihara. The keynote speeches were delivered by members of the Penang Heritage Trust.

On the final day, participants were taken to traditional homes which still function as home and workplace. Here extended families were still running family businesses of soy bean sauce and sake. Later, section meetings were held at the Naramachi Centre where Ms Boey presented a slideshow on the "Conservation of Shophouses in Chinatown". Mrs Nagahiko Tsujimoto spoke on why young people should live in Nara. There were a number of panel discussions.

The Symposium concluded with a farewell party, giving many the opportunity to wear national costume.
Azizah’s celebration

In early March, to celebrate the festivals of Hari Raya and Chinese New Year, which coincided this year, a dinner was held at Azizah’s. To encourage as many members as possible to participate, the Social Events Committee decided to subsidize the event.

About one hundred members and guests, among them Mrs David Marshall and Brother McNally, arrived at Azizah’s restaurant which had just been opened in Albert Court. Some had entered into the spirit of the evening by wearing traditional costumes such as sarong kebayas. Gentlemen sported batik shirts or kurtas. The less adventurous wore bright colours which all contributed to the festive feeling. Everyone was greeted by smiling waiters and waitresses in traditional Malay costume.

When everyone was seated and piced with a welcome drink, Ms Boey Yut Mei introduced Dr Kwok Kian Woon who gave a short welcoming speech to all assembled. The few restaurateurs, not part of the Society, were encouraged to join the party.

Azizah introduced herself and explained that although Nonya cuisine normally represents the blending of Malay and Chinese dishes she had decided to give us different concoctions combining the two very distinctive cuisines. The members were in for a treat as she surpassed herself serving unusual blendings of traditional dishes, which were delicious.

As dinner was served course by course members were able to mingle without being in danger of missing any dish.

Once the hunger pangs had been satisfied, Ms Boey introduced Mr Lee Liang Hye, a member of the Culture Society, who sported a beautiful traditional turquoise Chinese silk with mandarin collar and traditional frogging. He explained the “Significance of Chinese New Year”.

As dinner came to a close the waiters and waitresses began to give renditions of Malay court dances. The audience was invited to join them in the ronget. Those who felt competent needed little encouragement and the evening ended on a gay note.
The Singapore Art Museum invited members to a special evening on 7 February 1996.

The invitation extended much beyond the mere opening of the galleries for a private viewing, but also a forum on the building and aims of the Museum.

Upon arrival we met in the glass hall situated between two courtyards which were very reminiscent of Europe. The serenity and grace which this induced was immediate and made an appropriate setting for mingling between members of the Ceramic Society, museum staff and our own members. The Museum had laid on a delightful array of finger food with tea and coffee from their own cafe.

As the time drew near for the commencement of the forum people drifted up the spiral wooden staircase to the second level into the auditorium which was, originally, a chapel. Before entering, there is a very striking work of four differently woven V-shaped baskets set in what looked like young rice paddy. Inside the long, narrow hall, the topic of conversation was the varied floor tiles, and their authenticity. This was verified during the forum, as was the question on the religious artifacts on the walls.

The moderator for the forum was Ms Lise Young, the President of the Ceramics Society. She introduced the members of the panel: Dr Earl Lu, Chairman of the Singapore Art Museum, curators, Ms Susie Koay, Ms Joanna Lee and Mr Ahmad Mashadi and the architect, Mr Wong Hooe Wai.

Dr Lu gave a brief history to the setting up of the Art Museum and its aims. The Museum has a Singapore section to show the potential of our artists who have made an important contribution to the regional art scene and it was hoped to build on this to become a regional museum thereby showing the diversity in South-east Asia. Although today’s art scene is youthful, the main thrust came from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art graduates of the fifties, sixties and seventies.

Mr Wong Hooe Wai, found himself the centre of attention, as many of the initial questions concerned the building restoration. The building shape is unusual and was the major challenge in the transformation to an art gallery. He said his immediate response to the building was its symmetry and he was retained by using glass to enclose areas which could then be used by the Museum. The foundation stone was laid in 1855 when a bottle was buried. This was not found.

Since the mid-80’s the government had taken a greater interest and funds of about one million dollars were now available. Of the approximately three thousand pieces in the collection probably two-thirds was donated by the public. This is because the collector buys before the artist is famous and the Museum cannot do this. The Museum is also looking for donors for additional sponsorship.

The next question asked was how the Museum is encouraging general interest. Ms Susie Koay stated that the museum was consciously trying to reach out to the general public especially the young. School groups are being encouraged to visit. It is hoped that the electronic gallery will be an especial attraction. An educational package is envisaged with a component to show how to appreciate art. Guided tours might be introduced to highlight important exhibitions.

Dr Lu rounded off the forum by saying that as this is a contemporary Art Museum the pieces date from the 30’s and 40’s, but the future of the Museum must start with values being absorbed by the young which is why the emphasis on young people for the promotion of the Museum.

Mr William Lim gave a vote of thanks from the floor to the panel for giving their time and organizing the evening to give the members of both societies the opportunity to learn about the Museum and viewing the Exhibition Modernity and Beyond.

Members then left the auditorium to walk around the galleries.
Geraldene’s Thaipusam Walk on 3rd February

This Hindu Festival, devoted to the Lord Subramaniam, actually begins the day before when his statue, elaborately decorated with expensive jewellery and finery, together with his two consorts, is taken from the Perummal Temple, in Serangoon Road, to the Thandayuthapani Temple, in Tank Road, a distance of about four kilometres.

The one significant difference about this walk is the unsocial hour at which it begins. Members were encouraged to meet Geraldene at 6.30am at the Perummal Temple to witness Hindus celebrating the annual Festival of Thaipusam. Devotees are paying a penance for a fulfilled vow such as, the birth of a child, recovery from a serious illness, avoidance of some calamity or even the realization of some great desire.

In the courtyard of the Temple, there appears to be complete chaos as devotees, who have spiritually cleansed themselves by fasting for one month, are being prepared for the penance, the most extreme of which is carrying the kavadi. This is a wooden arch on a wood base decorated with peacock feathers, carried on the shoulders. There are other ritual objects such as a pot of milk or different kinds of fruit carried on the base of the kavadi. The body is mutilated with hooks inserted under the skin, which are connected to the kavadi by string, or thin chain, skewers are thrust through the middle of the tongue and yet others through both cheeks. Whilst this is being done, the devotee appears to be in a state of trance, which is sustained by friends singing, and drumming with a mesmerizing beat. None of the devotees is bleeding or appears to be in any physical distress. There are also a large number of women and children devotees carrying water pots and milk jugs on their shoulders.

Bare-footed the devotee, sometimes twirling, and his entourage, chanting and beating drums leave the Temple to walk to Tank Road, where more ceremonies are conducted before the penance is completed.

To the faithful, the ritual is revered and the kavadi carrier is respected and honoured. It is a time of humble thanksgiving for those whose prayers have been answered. To the onlooker, it is an astonishing, emotional sight. One is left in awe at the faith displayed.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

"THE DAVID MARSHALL LETTERS FROM CHINA"
To be published in September. These letters were written when the late Mr Marshall visited China when he was Singapore’s Chief Minister in the 50’s. This project was sponsored by the Lee Foundation.

"CHINATOWN WALK" by GERALDENE LOWE
This will be one of the first booklets in the series the Society has just announced. The original plan to produce many walks in one book has been abandoned in favour of the pamphlet/booklet.

SEMINAR: CHINESE-EDUCATED COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE
This seminar, focusing on the changes within this community from the 60’s to the 70’s, has been postponed to early 1997 due to Hwa Chong Alumni organizing a similar topic seminar which was held recently.

"SHONAN: THE JAPANESE IN SINGAPORE"
This very successful Society publication will be published in Japanese in November, by the Gaifusha Publishing Inc of Tokyo, Japan.