

'Treasures of the World' Delight Singapore

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues



General view of the temple at Borobudur, circa CE 1814, watercolour on paper, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles collection

The much-awaited *Treasures of the World* exhibition opened at the National Museum of Singapore on 5 December to enthusiastic crowds. It is the first time that this touring exhibit of the British Museum, London, is on display in Southeast Asia. The exhibition encapsulates man's journey from prehistoric times to the 21st century, via 239 stunning artefacts from the six major regions of the world (Africa, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania) as well as the Modern World. Ancient artefacts, exquisite artworks, opulent jewellery, somber funerary articles and many other relics are on display. The artefacts tell compelling stories of power, identity, adornment and death; and how they were embodied in the world's different cultures. Here's a peek at some of the exhibition's highlights.

One of the treasures and the oldest artefact on display is the stone hand axe from Olduvai Gorge in present-day Tanzania. Dated to be around 800,000 years old, this hand axe was found in

1931 by renowned Kenyan paleoanthropologist Dr Louis Leakey during his first expedition to Olduvai Gorge. Made of white quartz with amethyst bands, it would have been



Stone hand axe, Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania, about 800,000 years old, height 13.6cm, width 7.7cm, depth 4.1cm

used by our human ancestors to dig for tubers, chop wood, skin and butcher animals, smash bones to extract the marrow for food, along with a multitude of other uses. It was sized so that it would have been comfortable when held in a human hand.

Stone tools were first made during the Lower Palaeolithic age (3.3 million to 300,000 years ago) and they are a crucial milestone in the evolution of man. During that time, man learnt to use a rock hammer to remove flakes from a rounded stone, thus fabricating a hand axe. This is indicative of man's ability to think, design and create utilitarian objects. Some scientists also believe that the ability to shape a symmetrical hand axe could possibly have been a parameter for choosing a mate, as it was symbolic of the toolmaker's skill and strength.

While human life began in Africa, the ability of man to make stone tools helped him survive in different environments, thus enabling the spread of humans to the Middle East, Europe and Asia. As the longest-used tool in human history, the ancient hand axe has been found throughout Africa, Asia and Europe.

Another crown jewel of the exhibition and my personal favourite is the collection of enigmatic Lewis Chessmen. They are named after the place they were found – the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, off the northwest coast of Scotland. In 1831, a stash of 93 medieval gaming pieces was uncovered on the shores of Lewis. This is the single, largest find of 12th century European objects made purely for leisure purposes. It is believed that the hoard belonged to a merchant travelling from Norway to Ireland.

The two pieces on display at the National Museum are a knight riding a horse, equipped for battle, and a standing bishop holding a staff and holy book. Both are carved from a walrus' tusk. The Lewis chessmen date back to 1150-1200 and their age was estimated primarily from the shape of the bishop's mitre. The introduction of the bishop to European chess was recent at the time, representative of the increasing importance of the Church in state matters.

The carving style on the pieces has led scholars to believe that the Lewis Chessmen were made in Norway. The Isle of Lewis was part of the Kingdom of Norway during that time period. When and why the chessmen were buried on Lewis is still a matter of debate.

The chessmen, a must-see for any chess enthusiast, have graced book covers (one of Agatha Christie's *Big Four* novels) and have made movie appearances as well (the chess scene between Harry Potter and Ron Weasley in the film *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*).

There's a lot here for art lovers too. Many rare paintings are part of the exhibition. *The general view of the temple at Borobudur*, an 1814 watercolour on paper, comes from the collection of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, a name familiar to all Singaporeans. Painted by an unknown artist, this illustration depicts the Mahayana Buddhist Temple at Borobudur, built in the 8th and the 9th century by the Sailendra dynasty.



Lewis chess piece (a bishop) found on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, made about 1150-1200 CE

In 1811, Stamford Raffles, a young official of the British East India Company, was appointed the Lieutenant-Governor of Java. Raffles was informed of a hidden hill with many carved stones, which the locals believed was the site of an ancient monument called *budur*. So Raffles sent the Dutch engineer, H C Cornelius, to investigate. With a team of 200 men, Cornelius took two months to clear the site of the thick jungle vegetation and uncover the pyramid-shaped temple we see in the painting. It is believed that this watercolour was created for Raffles right after the temple's discovery in 1814.

The Borobudur temple is built in three tiers around a hill, which serves as the natural core of the structure. It

functioned as a key centre of Buddhism until royal power shifted away from Central Java to the east in the 10th century. As a result, the importance of the site began to decrease and the temple was eventually abandoned in the 16th century. Today a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Borobudur temple is Indonesia's most-visited tourist attraction as well as one of the greatest Buddhist monuments in the world.

The treasures of this exhibition are not limited to gold and silver artefacts. Another prized artefact is the pearl

shell ornament (known as *riji*) from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. When we use the word 'ornament', it conjures up images of a piece of jewellery worn around a woman's neck, on the ears or the hands. Interestingly, this ornament was worn by the Aboriginal men of northwestern and central Australia, during the mid-19th century, as a pubic cover. Made of carved and polished pearl shell, the *riji* had one hole drilled into it and was worn suspended at the waist by a belt made of twisted human hair, positioned over the wearer's genitalia.

This *riji* is fairly large (length 47.5cm, width 12cm), not surprising since the pearl oysters *pinctada maxima*, from which the shell is obtained, are the largest pearl oysters in the world, growing up to 30cm in diameter. The luminosity and lustre of the pearl shell was associated with water or rain, a symbol of life, especially in the dry interior of Australia. The maze-like design seen on this *riji* was common pre-1920s and some indigenous people have described the zigzag design as ripples left by the tides on the beach or the ripples caused by wind on water. The incisions on the *riji* were filled with red ochre, a naturally occurring earth pigment containing an iron oxide that lends a deep orange or brown colour. The *riji* were highly valued as ornaments and were traded among Aboriginal groups.

The Treasures of the World exhibition will be on at the National Museum of Singapore until 29 May 2016.

There will be daily guided tours in English at 11:30 am and 2:30 pm. Details at www.nationalmuseum.sg/exhibitions/exhibition-list/treasures-of-the-world



Pearl shell ornament, Kimberley, Western Australia, early to mid-19th century CE

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