
Mythopoeia in the Museum: The Eleven 'National Treasures' of the National Museum of Singapore and the Afterlife of Artefacts

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Abstract

Every interpretative and object-related curatorial choice made in a museum setting is inevitably political. In choosing what objects to display and what stories to tell, curators shape the way visitors understand and experience a particular nation's history as well as arouse a sense of familiarity or, possibly, incoherence. This article demonstrates the ways in which curatorial choices at the National Museum of Singapore's *Eleven Treasures* have both enabled and obstructed the construction of a national narrative. As well, it points to the creation of a collective mythology—a *mythopoeia* in the museum.

Using two key examples, the 'Singapore Stone' and a portrait of the last colonial administrator, Sir Thomas Shenton, I highlight how these objects' museological 'afterlives' are located in their ability to transcend their own histories to become potential symbols of common values. Simultaneously, I raise questions about authenticity, cultural citizenship, and the role of Singaporean museums in public memory. I argue that it is in the precarious space of incommensurability between the 'national treasures' and the everyday lives of Singaporeans that national identity crystalizes.

Since at least the 19th century, museums have played a central role in imagining the nation, and continue today to define and reinforce national identity. In bringing together objects from across places and times, classifying them in relation to a nation's culture and achievements, and arranging them for the viewing pleasure of visitors, the construction and renovation of national museums around the world testifies to the enduring power of nationalism. Moreover, a national museum documents a nation itself, through identifying objects that represent a national way of life and symbolize key values, beliefs, and experiences.

Figure 1. National Museum of Singapore. Photo: Emily W. Stokes-Rees.



This article focuses on the National Museum of Singapore. Established in 1849, it is the oldest in Southeast Asia. Originally called the Raffles Library and Museum, after the British colonial founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, it collected and exhibited items of natural and historical significance in the Straits Settlements.¹ The museum first occupied a section of the library and later moved to the Town Hall, changing its name to the 'Raffles Institution' at the same time. Both the Raffles Library and Museum moved in 1882 to a newly commissioned building on Stamford Road. This location officially opened on 12 October 1887, marking Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. The museum remains housed in the same building to this day.

After Singapore's independence in 1965, the museum shifted its collections mandate away from zoological and ethnographic objects to focus more specifically on material related directly to the history of Singapore. Through the years there have been numerous minor updates and redisplay, but in 2003, the museum closed its doors for its first major renovation, which involved a massive expansion and full exhibition overhaul. It was with its grand re-opening in 2006 that the eleven 'national treasures' were unveiled for the first time.² Although in Singapore there is no central authority which decides upon 'official' national treasure status for objects, as the custodian of the most important collection of Singaporean

artefacts, the museum, along with representatives from the National Heritage Board, came up with a list of objects deemed to have significant historical importance to Singapore. The eleven treasures are not displayed as a single exhibit but are individually highlighted throughout the museum's narrative of the nation's history.

It is important to note that this article comes at a time of significant transformation, both political and social, after the death of Senior Minister and architect of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, in March of 2015. His passing marks an important transition, with inevitable challenges as well as promises and possibilities for Singapore. And as Lee himself believed so strongly, surely the lessons of past struggles and achievements will inspire Singaporeans to reflect on the common threads of experience that bind citizens together and shape their national identity. Within this wider context, this article demonstrates the ways in which the selection of the National Museum of Singapore's national treasures aids in the construction of a national narrative, while also pointing to the construction of a collective mythology—a *mythopoeia* in the museum.

Singapore's national treasures can be divided into three rough categories: first, those that are particularly rare or valuable, such as Javanese gold arm bands unearthed from Fort Canning Hill in the early twentieth century; second, those that are significant in their familiarity to most Singaporeans and thus able to represent a certain experience or population, such as a 1930s Fujian puppet stage; and third, there are those that are valuable by virtue of belonging to or representing an important individual or group, such as the last will and testament of Munshi Abdullah, the father of modern Malay Literature. Of course, some objects are difficult to categorize and some inevitably fall into more than one category. Each object in this group is intended to capture something valuable about Singapore, offering a material connection to the past. They are, as David Lowenthal puts it, 'bridges between now and then, physical connections to the past that are intended to aid in concretizing abstract memories'.³ The National Museum of Singapore thus documents not just the history of Singapore, but also the history of ideas about Singapore.

During a 2011 research visit, I spoke with a number of museum staff as well as many museum visitors, both formally and informally, about the status and display of the national treasures. It quickly became clear that for some of the museum staff, it felt challenging to be responsible for artefacts as 'treasures', because how is it possible to make such a decision? Similarly, although my conversations with visitors revealed a sincere respect for the authority of the museum staff to choose the objects, they also expressed a certain 'distance' from the objects and frequently suggested other objects that might connect more strongly to national identity for 'regular people'. The value of a 'treasure' is, after all, in the eyes of the beholder. Moreover, museums are under increasing pressure to emphasize everyday objects rather than valuable rarities, and to focus on the human experience of 'regular' people rather than traditional, elitist narratives. What makes these eleven objects 'treasures', I believe, is not simply their intrinsic value as individual artefacts, but in the greater narrative they collectively reveal about Singapore. In other words,

it is in the wider picture of Singaporean values and memories, and the tension between their familiarity and strangeness for visitors, that this small collection of treasures holds its mythopoeic power.

Mythopoeia, very simply, means mythmaking; however, it is a genre of storytelling which differs from more traditional ideas about myths arising from centuries of inherited, recited fables, passed down through generations. It refers instead to a narrative in which a fictional mythology is created by a particular author over a relatively short period of time, usually an individual author, and it is in this sense that the curatorial work that happens in a museum setting seems, to me, a logical alignment.⁴ *Mythopoeia* aims at imitating the real world, while also bringing myths and stories into a contemporary context. Singapore, emerging out of colonial rule in the 1960s, was effectively forced to forge a new identity and create a national narrative on the spot. Therefore, I feel the idea of *mythopoeia* is a conceptually good fit, despite Singapore and its postcolonial experience not being a fiction in any sense. And indeed, among theorists of nationalism, social constructionists like Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson argue that often nations originate not as historical communities or groups, but as myths fabricated by those who hold the power to shape what they consider to be the cultural and historical characteristics of a particular population into a narrative—a utopic abstraction of the nation.⁵ The museum has attempted to integrate mythological themes, such as ancestry and heroism, into its narrative. Moreover, whereas authors use words to communicate their myths, the museum uses objects to unify and extend the social community. The use of mythopoeia in this sense also helps illuminate some of the universal and timeless aspects of identity and provides Singapore's tumultuous history with a sense of coherence and shared values. The hope is, of course, that this national narrative eventually takes on a life of its own, becoming embedded in the psyche of the citizenry.

Building upon, and perhaps in some ways moderating, these ideas, Anthony Smith attributes special significance to the study of national symbols, in their capacity to 'give concrete meaning and visibility to the abstractions of nationalism'.⁶ Though there are plenty of discussions and disagreements about whether nations are modern social constructions or organic primordial phenomena, there is no question that national symbols are entirely socially constructed, whether or not they are experienced as such. Not only do these symbols, in Smith's mind, act as catalysts for the formation and maintenance of public memory about a nation, they are also crucially important in fusing nation to state in situations where there is no pre-existing myth of communal memory. In other words, just as national icons serve as markers for the collective memory of the nation, they simultaneously represent the power of the state to define it. And indeed, at the core of the mythopoeic genre is the creation of a legitimate mythology—that is, a narrative that is well-constructed and believable, rather than necessarily 'true'. It goes beyond Anderson's concept of an 'imagined community', which centres on the media (newspapers etc.) that make us feel connected, to the construction of an entire world including mythological elements such as a well-ordered history, heroic characters, a strong sense of place,

as well as values and beliefs. It points, in short, to an inherently creative act, as the assembly of the 'national treasures' in Singapore has been. It is thus within this framework that I have been thinking about these objects and their role.

Critics of the concept of mythopoeia have referred to it as 'artificial mythology', which emphasizes that it did not evolve naturally, and therefore should not be taken seriously. The folklorist Alan Dundes, for one, argues that, 'A work of art, or artifice, cannot be said to be the narrative of a culture's sacred tradition . . . [it is] at most, artificial myth'.⁷ I believe, however, that it is through the fact that the story told by the treasures is, largely, true, and through the museum's success in rekindling a sense of collective imagination in Singapore, that the museum provides more than simply a backstory—the myth becomes fully realized, with the larger picture it frames being more than the sum of its parts. It is thus within this framework that I have been thinking about these objects, however in a short article like this, I am not going to attempt to talk about all eleven objects. In this context I will discuss two of the treasures—the Singapore Stone and the portrait of Sir Thomas Shenton—which I feel are particularly illuminating of these ideas as they are expressed in the context of the National Museum of Singapore. I also briefly highlight a third treasure—the portrait of Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham—for comparative purposes.

The Singapore Stone

Figure 2. The Singapore Stone display, National Museum of Singapore. Photo: Emily W. Stokes-Rees.



Figure 3. The Singapore Stone, National Museum of Singapore. Photo: Emily W. Stokes-Rees.



Early on in one's visit to the National Museum of Singapore's history galleries, visitors encounter the first national treasure displayed—The Singapore Stone.⁸ This artefact is a fragment of a much larger sandstone slab that originally stood at the mouth of the Singapore River. The slab, which is believed to date back to at least the thirteenth century, bears an undeciphered inscription. Recent studies suggest that the inscription is either Old Javanese or Sanskrit. In January of 1843, on the orders of the acting Settlement Engineer, Captain D. H. Stevenson, the slab was blown to pieces in order to clear and widen the passageway at the mouth of the river. Lieutenant-Colonel James Low petitioned to have the sandstone slab spared, and after the explosion he was permitted to select fragments to preserve. The pieces bearing the most legible parts of the inscription were sent to the Royal Asiatic Society's museum in Calcutta for analysis, where they remained until 1919, when the Raffles Museum and Library's representatives asked for the return of the fragments. Only one small piece, now known as 'The Singapore Stone', was received on indefinite loan.

The stone, on display at the National Museum since 2006, is a material representation of Singapore's creation myth, even with minimal resonance to back it up. The stone signifies longevity—adding length to a national history that until fairly recently was viewed as really only beginning in 1819, when Raffles landed and established a Crown colony. Its mysterious ancient language links Singapore to a pre-colonial ancestry, even if unknown—the perfect common denominator for the myth of a common origin for the nation. It is, moreover, exhibited as a relic—illuminated beautifully in a dark gallery, and of course, it is only one fragment of the original larger piece. Despite its mystery, in other words, the stone provides tangible, three-dimensional evidence of a period in Singapore's history before the arrival of British. As a relic, it is about belief and awe, rather than historical analysis. The curatorial idea here is clearly to invoke what is well known as 'the museum effect'—that is, as Paul Williams writes, 'the enlargement of consequence that comes from being . . . rescued, cleaned, numbered, researched, arranged, lit, and written about'.⁹ The hope is to enable the object to become valuable in new, or renewed, ways.

One could argue, certainly, that this risks imbuing an object like the Singapore Stone with false significance in the sense that we are being asked to accept a narrative of this object which gives it signifying power, when it was not necessarily part of a common national narrative or consciousness in the first place. And indeed, observing visitors in the gallery, I first noticed that when they approach the display, their voices lower and many even lean forward slightly, invited into a performance of awe and wonder fueled by the dim lighting and sealed case. The message conveyed by the exhibitionary techniques is undeniably that one is approaching a *special* object. Hunched and whispering, the visitors I observed adopted reverent postures, and, notably, when small children were present, adults almost always took their hand, as if being in the presence of such an object required extra supervision. I also overheard frequent comments on its rarity and perceived age, again expressing awe and wonder. Many visitors clearly desire more information about the stone than they are given. It is unfamiliar,

and viewers are intrigued by what is unknown about the object, they ponder its mysterious origin, and ask each other questions about researchers' attempts to decipher the inscription. The exhibitionary techniques at play perform a narrative of national origin and myth, and as visitors follow the museum's discourse, they not only experience the object, but are drawn into a particular *performance* around the object as a national treasure.

The anthropologist Alfred Gell moves away from thinking about meaning, and asks what objects *do* rather than what they *are* or *mean*. The main thrust of his argument is that objects have agency, suggesting that although they themselves are not intentional beings, they frequently act as the mediums through which people discover and demonstrate their intentions—a performative relationship.¹⁰ In other words, he would argue in the case of a museum object that when visitors respond primarily to what is put on display rather than how it is displayed, the object itself exercises greater agency in relation to the viewer than the producer of the display. But in situations where a viewer responds to an object because of *how* it is put on display or what it depicts, then the producer exercises greater agency than the object. The traditional museological focus on individual encounters with authentic objects is thus being replaced by a new perspective that emphasizes artefacts and displays as performing a critical role in the processes of creating meaning.

While some hold that once an object is taken away from its original context and placed in a museum collection, it effectively 'dies', I would argue, as Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Daniel Miller (2008) have before me, that this is where its 'afterlife' begins. It is a new chapter in an object's life history, one of symbolism and storytelling rather than form and function. The afterlife of an object is thus in its possibility; no longer fixed to a particular time and place, it can be used to tell many stories, and can be approached from different perspectives. In short, it is within the museological afterlife that an object like the Singapore Stone can transcend its own history to become a symbol of common values and experiences. In drawing attention to the age of the stone as well as the air of mystery surrounding the origin of the undecipherable script, the museum offers a pre-colonial history—the possibility of an origin myth—for Singapore. It is interpreted as concrete evidence of a pre-British, innocent past uncontaminated by either colonialism or modernity. In other words, it contains a mythopoeic element of 'the impossible'—an enchanting object with mysterious origins; and in that transcendental space between the object and the visitor, I argue, is where the mythopoeia takes hold, inviting visitors into a narrative of Singapore before colonialism—a history that is no longer part of anyone's *actual* memory, but is real and poignant in one's experience of it.

The Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas

Figure 4. Xu Beihong. Portrait of Sir Shenton Thomas, National Museum of Singapore, Image size: H: 244.5 x W: 134.0, oil on canvas, 1939. Photo: Emily W. Stokes-Rees.



The second treasure to be discussed is a portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas, the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements from 1934-1942. The portrait was painted by renowned Chinese artist, Xu Beihong, in July of 1939.¹¹ In this large, prominently hung image, we can observe Thomas in full military dress. It is immediately apparent that he is standing with a fairly formal and stiff posture, conveying, perhaps, a not-so subtle gesture to his tension in 1939, anticipating the coming war. Notably, to his right stands a wooden table with what appears to be mother-of-pearl inlay that is reminiscent of many Asian designs. On his left is a classical column, an easily recognizable symbol of Western civilization and empire. The two objects balance each other within the frame, and provide what might have been intended as unifying symbolism, pointing to Thomas' strong allegiance to both Singapore and Britain. It is here, I think, that Thomas's 'treasured' place in Singaporean memory rests, as he and his wife, Lucy Marguerite (Daisy) Montgomery, chose to remain in Singapore for the duration of the war, and were eventually interned in Changi prison. Even as a prisoner-of-war, Thomas cared immensely for Singapore, writing letters to the directors of the Botanic Gardens, archives, and Raffles Museum, urging them to do whatever might be required to protect and preserve their holdings. Shenton's role in the

narrative (myth) of the nation is not simple, but points to a world of complex political alliances and conflicts. He is simultaneously a mythical figure and historical representative of what the nation today stands for, and what type of devotion it merits.

Notably, right next to Shenton's portrait is displayed another designated 'treasure'—John Singer Sargent's 1904 portrait of Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham, the first Resident General of the Federated Malay States (1896-1901). The portrait was commissioned in honour of his retirement in 1904. I add this brief description of his portrait, as these two paintings stand in such stark contrast to each other. Unlike Shenton's tense, formal posture, Swettenham is standing confidently, perhaps even swarthily, his hand on his hip. He is leaning, apparently relaxed, on textiles evoking the Edwardian luxury Sargent was known for depicting. Accessories evoking Swettenham's Far Eastern career can be seen everywhere—a gilded armchair, magnificent Malayan brocades (Swettenham was an avid collector), and a large globe is just visible in the top corner, with a segment of the Malay States just visible. Both men served Singapore with honour, though the portraits point to contrasting eras and different experiences in the development of the nation. While Swettenham is elegant and, perhaps, 'conqueror-esque' in his demeanor—everything about his portrait exuding power and authority, Shenton's tension and formality are palpably felt.

In both portraits, the museum simultaneously stimulates a nostalgic yearning for the colonial past as a triumphant era of collaboration between East and West, of Singapore's incredible development into a world-class trading port, and of gratitude and indebtedness to its loyal British leaders.

The intimacy of a portrait gives a human face to a history that many do not remember, and Shenton simultaneously becomes both a lofty icon—a protector—and ordinary citizen, loyal to his home. The portrait not only tells a story about a particular individual, but also reflects changing ideas about what is worth remembering and why. Largely faded from public memory, the designation of Shenton's portrait as a treasure resurrects the story he represents and re-establishes his place in a national narrative that resonates with contemporary concerns and values.

All myth is a response, a reaction to uncontrollable forces all around us, and his portrait re-captures some of what made him so important to Singaporeans during World War II—he symbolizes exemplary behaviour and loyalty amongst the citizenry. Shenton stands in for the colonial experience, as well as the struggle and suffering Singapore experienced under Japanese occupation, and as such he is a figure that embodies what one would want, perhaps, to remember about the British in Singapore. Certainly, he represents how the British very much wished to be remembered, as their administration of Singapore drew to a close. As Shenton expressed uncertainty in the years leading up to the Japanese invasion, his portrait invokes a nostalgia—a yearning for a lost time, but also a sentiment of loss and displacement that perhaps offers an antidote to the uncertainties of contemporary Singapore—an optimistic belief in the future.

One can learn a lot about any country by who has been enshrined in its national museum; heroes reflect the experiences and needs of the generation that

creates them. Shenton encourages visitors to think about legacies inherited from the past, and those to be passed on to future generations. His portrait becomes an allegorical figure representing the desire for national attributes—loyalty, courage, sacrifice, honour. The object thus facilitates the work of mourning, displacing personal pain and anxiety into the imaginary realm of collective memory, while simultaneously shoring up feelings of solidarity and national identity. Though one might argue that in a postcolonial context, one of the remaining colonial burdens is the need not only to 'invent' new traditions but also to 'forget' colonial symbols and customs. I would argue, however, that Thomas' portrait points to the colonial relationship as formative, and frequently challenging, for the British as well as Singaporeans. The portrait does not emphasize nor lessen the role of Britain, but re-positions it, taking a closer, self-authored look at its interpenetration into all aspects of Singaporean life. The museum, in other words, embodies a co-constructed postcolonial narrative—including both departing and remaining cultures. Cultural influences and interaction do not go only one way—there is always flow—and it is when we acknowledge it as a continuing two-way relationship, that the narrative weaves into the fabric of memory and identity. Thomas's image is thus both constant and flexible, rooted in the colonial past, yet speaking to the postcolonial condition of the present.

Joan Henderson, a Singapore-based scholar of tourism studies, argues that this kind of representation is not problematic for Singaporeans because the former colony is no longer a 'threat' in Singapore, which has made remarkable progress since independence to become an economically successful and self-confident nation. In a 2011 interview at Nanyang Technological University, she said to me: 'I think there is much less need to discuss colonial legacy these days now that Singapore feels it has largely "made it", however, it does add to the landscape, and adds to the diversity and interest of the modern storyline'.¹² The experience of colonization in Singapore is not, moreover, 'a cause of embarrassment, but rather of pride in subsequent achievement with Raffles remembered as the figure who helped make this possible'.¹³ As curator, Huism Tan, agreed: 'I think Singapore has got to be the only place in the Commonwealth that still glorifies its colonial past!'¹⁴

David Lowenthal suggests that nations freeing themselves from colonial rule generally try to erase their colonial experiences in the interest of asserting an autonomous national identity rooted in the pre-colonial past.¹⁵ However, this is not the case with Singapore. Although the nature of its past encompasses a colonial experience, a history which has the potential to be viewed negatively by the independent nation, Singapore's predominant memories exhibited in the museum are nostalgic reminiscences of the impact of British colonialism. It is important to emphasize, however, that this is not nostalgia for a forgotten innocent past, a lost time uncontaminated by colonial presence. History *before* colonialism is naturally no longer a part of anyone's memory in Singapore. Judging by the museum's displays, therefore, the museum stimulates a yearning for the colonial past as an antidote to the uncertainty of modernity.

National Museums, Identities, Treasures

Returning for a moment to Dundes's comments about 'artificial myths', in thinking about these two objects, I have often asked myself: should a 'national treasure' be about exceptionalism or widespread social impact? Typicality or recognizability? These objects represent efforts to define a national identity based on a sense of shared heritage, but whose way of life do they represent? I wonder how many of these treasures are familiar to Singaporeans today, or has their resonant power been lost in the whirlwind of economic growth? Many Singaporeans remember the fading years of the colonial era and the transition to independence, but fewer and fewer remain to recall the violence and fear of living under the Japanese occupation. The last time I was in Singapore conducting research, I made a point of asking people about objects that speak to their identity as Singaporeans. Not only did I ask people in the museum, but also shopkeepers, bus drivers, and even members of an exercise class I frequented in a local park. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, not one of these museum objects was mentioned. What was mentioned? For one, a steaming bowl of Singapore noodles or 'laksa', for example—was frequently brought up as something which illuminates the various forces—cultural, economic, *and* political—that have shaped Singaporean history. The Durian, a spiky and stinky fruit that is strictly forbidden on public transport, and chewing gum were also common, pointing to the rules that are such a part of the fabric of Singaporean life, Tiger Balm—an icon of Singaporean entrepreneurship, and, of course, the Merlion—the most photographed object in the nation.

The 'Merlion', Singapore's most photographed icon. (photo credit: peakpx.com)



Clearly, national icons need not be 'officially-sanctioned' in order to become catalysts for identity formation, and in this context the museum's epistemological discourse is clearly in tension with the prevailing public narrative. The objects that hold us together as a nation are those that say: 'to be one of us is to have this memory', and it is this notion that captures an incommensurability between institutional and public memory. It is not a question of what is true and not true, but a question of what is made relevant in the present. The designation of eleven museum objects as 'treasures' is a first step in their evolving signifying power,

but their role as symbols of collective identity does not yet seem to elicit the cultural resonance necessary to be true national icons. They are caught in a conundrum between familiarity and strangeness—between the power of the visual to evoke wonder, and the power of public memory—the place of hybridity that Stephen Greenblatt points to where visitors' imaginations are ignited to recognize the objects as emblematic.¹⁶ In the end, I think the treasures' effectiveness should be measured not in terms of their individual resonance, but in their ability to raise questions, stimulate conversation, and tell a wider, reflective story about Singaporean values, mysteries, ideals, and aspirations. As John Bodnar put it in 1992, 'Public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions . . . the former originates in the concerns of cultural leaders . . . [who] share a common interest in social unity . . . [whereas] vernacular culture . . . represents an array of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole'.¹⁷ He goes on to argue that, in contrast to official versions, ' . . . vernacular expressions convey what social reality *feels* like rather than what it should *be* like. Its very existence threatens the sacred and timeless nature of official expressions'.¹⁸

It is at the heart of these various conundrums of identity, nation building, and iconography, that one can locate the various, often conflicting, ideas about the role national identity can or should play in people's lives, and therefore the kind of place a Singaporean national museum should be—an institution that not only collects and preserves the artefacts of history, but also attempts to make sense of them as part of a wider national story—to be *mythopoeic* in its approach. The objects discussed here represent more than single moments in a nation's history, they capture particular ideas about the past, and about identity. As memories live on and evolve over time, they are mirrored in the 'after'-lives of objects. The museum has *re*-placed these items in a museum context, allowing them to tell their stories and be made meaningful again as part of a larger historical narrative. In other words, it is somewhere between what one experiences of identity in the museum and outside of the museum, somewhere in the space between the national treasures and the 'everyday' lives of Singaporeans, that national identity crystallizes.

Andreas Huyssen writes that national museums are placed, in general, not so much in the representation of what constitutes national life, but more in the representation of what has disappeared from it—preserving 'that which has fallen to the ravages of modernization'.¹⁹ This is exactly what we find in the National Museum of Singapore, but he also argues contrary to what I found in my conversations with Singaporeans, asserting that national objects tend to align more in the popular imagination with what is 'natural' and 'ancient' rather than modern, industrial, and popular. Perhaps, ultimately, these national treasures work in concert with more popular views to establish a web of signification. The value of an object as a 'national treasure' is more than the sum of ideas about age, monetary worth, and rarity, but comes from outside the object, from those who believe it to have a story worth remembering and repeating. It must reverberate with the current values of the nation.

The next step, then, is to consider how museums might expand visitors' interest in the symbolic connotations of objects. Nick Merriman advocates for interpretations welcoming plurality, imagination, and creativity in constructions of the past, and I would agree that museums need to look for opportunities to promote dialogue in order to relate objects to visitors' lives.²⁰ Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, the National Museum closed its doors again in early 2014 for another major renovation and revamping of the displays. This time, according to museum press releases, the focus is on increasing accessibility and emotional relevance in their history displays. The museum reopened in September of 2015, and I was fortunate to be able to visit again in the spring of 2016 to consider what had changed. The eleven national treasures, though now seemingly disbanded in any 'official' sense, are still very much present and visibly highlighted in the museum. As the museum evolves to allow new memories to take precedence, the national treasures continue to capture a moment in time—a time of active, intentional nation-building—a time of searching for meaningful icons. Shifting the narrative toward a more multi-vocal approach to identity, Singapore demonstrates the shifting ways in which national histories are often presented, rewriting, and reinventing itself every few years.

National museums are, perhaps at their best, meeting places for competing and evolving ideas about national identity. Though this collection of objects does not really allow much room for multiple ways of belonging in Singapore today, the museum can be seen as a palimpsest of national identities—where the residue of what has come before hones what follows. Humanity has a need, I believe, for a connection to something greater than ourselves. New myths must, and no doubt will, continue to be created in Singapore, and the recent passing of Lee Kuan Yew will undoubtedly bring new stories, memories, and iconic objects into the national narrative. I look forward to continuing to think about them.

Endnotes

1. 'Straits Settlements' refers to a number of British territories established in the early 19th century, located in what is now Malaysia and Singapore.
2. The full list of national treasures is as follows: (1) The Singapore Stone (2) a 1904 portrait of Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham, the first Resident General of the Federated Malay States, by John Singer Sargent; (3) the last will and testament of Munshi Abdullah, the father of modern Malay literature; (4) the mace of the City of Singapore (1953) that was presented by Chinese philanthropist Loke Wan Tho in conjunction with King George VI granting Singapore a Royal Charter in 1951, raising its status to a city; (5) an 1844 daguerreotype of the view from Fort Canning Hill by French customs service officer Alphonse-Eugene Jules, one of the earliest photographic images of Singapore; (6) fourteenth-century gold armlets and rings in East Javanese style, found at Fort Canning Hill in 1928; (7) a 1939 portrait of Sir Shenton Thomas, the last Governor of the Straits Settlements, by painter Xu Beihong; (8) a collection of 477 natural history drawings of flora and fauna in Melaka commissioned by Resident of Singapore William Farquhar in the 19th century; (9) a wooden hearse used for the funeral of Chinese philanthropist Tan Jiak Kim in 1917; (10) an early twentieth-century embroidered Chinese coffin cover, one of the largest of its kind in existence in Singapore; and (11) a glove puppet stage belonging to the Fujian puppet troupe, Xin Sai Le, which came to Singapore in the 1930s. See: Wei Chean Lim, "Singapore's Treasures" in *The Straits Times* (31 January 2006).
3. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 43.
4. This meaning of the word *mythopoeia* follows its use by J. R. R. Tolkien and C.S Lewis in the 1930s, such as in Tolkien's creation of 'Middle-earth', and also a poem, itself entitled *mythopoeia*, as well as C.S. Lewis' mythical world, Narnia.
5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth. Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
6. Anthony Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Brandeis. MA: Historical Society of Israel, 2000), 73.
7. Alan Dundes quoted in John Adcox, *Can Fantasy be Myth? Mythopoeia and The Lord of the Rings*. Published by *The Newsletter of the Mythic Imagination Institute* (September/October, 2003), np.
8. John Crawfurd (1783–1868), who was 'Resident of Singapore', described the slab in his journal on 3 February 1822 in these terms: 'On the stony point which forms the western side of the entrance of the salt creek, on which the modern town of Singapore is building, there was discovered, two years ago, a tolerably hard block of sand-stone, with an inscription upon it. This I examined early this morning. The stone, in shape, is a rude mass, and formed of the one-half of

a great nodule broken into two nearly equal parts by artificial means; for the two portions now face each other, separated at the base by a distance of not more than two feet and a half, and reclining opposite to each other at an angle of about forty degrees. It is upon the inner surface of the stone that the inscription is engraved. The workmanship is far ruder than anything of the kind that I have seen in Java or India; and the writing, perhaps from time, in some degree, but more from the natural decomposition of the rock, so much obliterated as to be quite illegible as a composition. Here and there, however, a few letters seem distinct enough. The character is rather round than square.' (The quotation was taken from Arthur Joo-Jock Lim, "Geographical Setting," in Ernest C. T. Chew and Edwin Lee, eds, *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 9.

9. Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (New York: Berg, 2007), 28.
10. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 21.
11. Elaine Cheong, "Sir Shenton Thomas: A Noble Life of Distinguished Service," *Passage* (May/June 2011), 9.
12. Joan Henderson, interview with the author, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, June 2011.
13. Joan Henderson, "Conserving Colonial Heritage: Raffles Hotel in Singapore," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, no.1 (2001): 15.
14. Huism Tan, conversation with the author, Asian Civilizations Museum, July 2002.
15. David Lowenthal, "The Place of the Past in the American Landscape," in *Geographies of the Mind*, eds D. Lowenthal and M. Bowden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 89.
16. Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 54.
17. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13-14.
18. *Ibid.*, 14 (my emphasis)
19. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories* (London: Routledge, 1995), 15.
20. Nick Merriman, "Involving the Public in Museum Archaeology," in *Public Archaeology*, ed. Nick Merriman (London: Routledge, 2004), 101-2.

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Biographical Notes

Emily Stokes-Rees is Associate Director of the School of Design and Associate Professor of Museum Studies at Syracuse University in Upstate New York. She is a material anthropologist whose research centres on evolving ideas around cultural citizenship and representation in postcolonial contexts. Recent publications include: “Re-thinking Anne: Interpreting Japanese heritage at a quintessentially Canadian site,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*. (2018); “Symbiotic Spaces: Decolonizing Identity in the Spatial Design of the Museum of Macau” in *The Interior Architecture Theory Reader*. Gregory Marinic, ed. New York: Routledge, 2017; and “A Tale of Two Missions: Common Pasts/Divergent Futures at Transnational Historic Sites,” *The Public Historian*. Vol. 39 No. 3 (2017, with Debora Ryan). Emily has also worked on a wide variety of museum projects and exhibitions in the US, Canada, Europe, and Asia.

ewstokes@syr.edu