



**Southeast Asian
Ceramic Society**

**“From China to Arabia: Ancient Treasure
Ships and the Great Oman Voyage”
25 June – 18 July 2010
VivoCity Central Court, Level 1
Singapore**

A review by Natalie SY Ong

Curated by the National Geographic Society in conjunction with the Museum of East Asian Art (Bath, UK), this exhibition was organised to coincide with the world premiere of the documentary on the National Geographic Channel about the re-creation of a 9th-century treasure ship that will sail from Oman to Singapore. More information on the Arab dhow, the *Jewel of Muscat*, can be found here: www.jewelofmuscat.tv

This exhibition is notable in two ways: the first of its kind, it was held in a mall and therefore, its aim of providing effortless and affordable access (S\$2 per adult, free for children under 12 years) to the public was fairly easily met, as can be seen from the crowds waiting to enter.



However, it seems Singaporeans are extremely demanding – at the end of my visit, I was actually approached by a mother of three young children who asked me if I was done with my ticket and if she could have it as the complimentary ones to which she was entitled had run out. I gave it to her even while explaining the minimal costs incurred, but to no avail, which led me to wonder: what more can be done if even this was not enough?

Nonetheless, it seemed to be a success, judging by the number of interested passers-by, who were initially attracted to the colourful displays and videos, as well as the mini games that were placed on touch-screen consoles around the area. Credit for this should probably go to the producer of the exhibition, Globe Creative (HK), who conceptualised the space and the usage of it. I observed that those who paused to play the games or view the panels then felt compelled to learn more about the intriguing premise: Ancient Treasure Ships plying the seas in search of riches, like in the tales of Sinbad.



Once inside, visitors were greeted with a short 3-4 minute trailer of the National Geographic documentary. After it ended, they would proceed to the next gallery, which set the context of trade in ancient times and explained that the Maritime Silk Route became possible by the development of seafaring over 2000 years ago and flourished as overland routes were limited by the geography of different regions. To that end, it was interesting to see that Chinese stoneware, celadons and even Yue ware were exported to the Middle East as early as the 9th century, as evidenced by sherds found at Sohar, Oman.



The next gallery had a mockup of the Arab dhow as a central display, surrounded by text panels describing navigation over 12,000km according to the monsoons and how international commerce benefitted Asia. One of the most significant ways is the import of cobalt, a mineral native to Persia, which set off the creation of blue and white porcelains that China has since become famous for. Said to be as precious as gold, cobalt was used on one of the earliest Chinese ceramics (below right), dated to the Tang dynasty (618-907). The other objects in this room were examples of the earliest finds in the West of Chinese ceramics. They came in the form of storage jars like the martaban, and other types of early export ware, such as Tang *sancai* and Changsha wares, as well as 11th-century *qingbai* wares.



This was followed by the next gallery that described the role of the famous Chinese admiral, Zheng He, in bringing exotic trade goods to China and disseminating Chinese wares to the West in the 14th and 15th centuries. We see then vast quantities of luxury goods – silver and gold, bronze and jade. Unfortunately, the window that displayed this last category of items was placed far too high above my eye level for me to appreciate the fine workmanship of ancient craftsmen. I acknowledge the effort to inject some diversity into the design space as homogeneous windows would make the exhibit appear static, but it was a shame that, unless one was over 175cm in height, one would have been unable to view the exquisite artefacts properly. This is more of a pity especially since the exhibition seemed to target also children. The booklet “Kids Explorer Guide” had quite a number of fun activities for the young ones, who, unfortunately, could not view the jade pieces without being carried by an adult.



In the fifth and sixth galleries, we are shown the rise of European dominance in trade from the 16th century, and yet Chinese porcelain, particularly the blue and whites, was still so prized and so costly in the West that it led to imitation wares being produced in Iran, Turkey, and Holland (left and right). There was therefore a preponderance of these on display. Superb specimens as well as other Chinese wares were presented, although, again, unfortunately, some were placed too high to be fully appreciated. It was also interesting to see an evolution of forms and iconography for export. Large dishes with floral and geometric patterns, for example, were specially manufactured for the Arab market.



The final gallery was entitled “The Voyage Recreated” where a video of the making of the Arab dhow was shown, along with explanatory texts and pictures.

The galleries were, in actuality, small confined spaces. The use of the limited space was well appreciated, with most galleries having a central display surrounded by other showcases which visitors could walk around comfortably in. The lighting was also attractive, with none of the dreaded glare from the mall's fluorescent lights, and made the text pleasantly readable. In addition, the use of wooden surfaces throughout the exhibition space was a nice touch, greatly enhancing the atmosphere of ancient times.



However, I did have a few gripes. First of all, some of the text panels were badly placed, sometimes hidden behind pillars or other displays. This was not helped by having text that was sometimes clumsy, with “Asianisms” such as “Celadon was also highly prized because a) it was expensive, b) it was rare, and c) *it indicated food poisoning*”. How did the celadon do so – did it have stomach cramps, did it have an arrow or a finger pointing to the food or to the poisoner? This led me to wonder if the text had not been written by the curator himself, Dr. Fredrik Hiebert, a PhD-holding American, currently employed by the National Geographic Society. Indeed, when I talked to Karen Chang, Director of Globe Creative, she confirmed that her staff had written the texts. In this case, I applaud them for being so diligent and resourceful for researching the information, previously the exclusive domain of specialists, and making it so palatable for the public.



The major issue I had with the exhibition was the lack of timelines and an explanation on the relative value of the artefacts. As most of us in the Society are art lovers, including specialists of South-East Asian ceramics, we are placed in a unique position of understanding how these items fit into the history of the region. This, however, cannot be said for the general public, to whom these objects appear, yes, old, but also obscure. A timeline would have enabled the less well-informed to apprehend, in a single glance, the scope, magnitude and relevance of this exhibition.

All said, it was nonetheless an extremely laudable effort to bring art and archaeology to the public and in this sense, I am sure that this aim has been met. As for amateurs, it is certainly a worthwhile exhibition to attend, and will serve as an *amuse-bouche* which whets our appetites in anticipation of an eventual exhibition of the Belitung cargo at the end of the year while putting into context the arrival of the dhow in Singapore on the 3rd July 2010.

Photos credits: Natalie SY Ong and Globe Creative (HK) Pte Ltd