

**MEDIA RELEASE**

# sumatra

## ISLE OF GOLD

*First international touring show on Sumatran culture opens  
at the Asian Civilisations Museum*

**28 July 2010, SINGAPORE** – The story of an ancient crossroads of Asia - the Indonesian island of Sumatra - comes to life at the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) newest exhibition. ***Sumatra: Isle of Gold***, on show from **30 July to 7 November 2010**, features over 300 objects that showcase the unique culture and identity of Sumatra, especially the cross-cultural influences that have shaped the island from ancient times to the present day. It will be launched by **Guest-of-Honour Mr Lui Tuck Yew, Acting Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts at 6.30pm on Thursday, 29 July 2010.**

Co-organised by the ACM, the National Museum of Indonesia and the Museum Volkenkunde (National Museum of Ethnology), Leiden, *Sumatra: Isle of Gold* is the first international travelling exhibition on Sumatran culture. The exhibition first opened in Jakarta last year and then travelled to Leiden. For the show in Singapore, the ACM has incorporated over 100 additional objects from its own collection and private collections. *Sumatra Isle of Gold* is also the highlight of the National Heritage Board's *Fokus Indonesia* Festival.

"This cross-cultural exhibition is especially significant for Singapore. Sumatra was a point of arrival for new ideas and beliefs, which gives the island a significant place within Southeast Asia's history. The exhibition reveals to our audiences Sumatra's rich cultural legacy through an array of beautiful objects in many media," said Dr Alan Chong, Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

## **Crossroads of Asia**

As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, Indian records mention *Suvarnadvipa* or 'Gold Island' in reference to Sumatra and other parts of Southeast Asia. The island's strategic location and wealth of natural resources, including gold, pepper and aromatics, made it a busy entrepot for trade. These interactions gave rise to the diverse cultures, customs and peoples found on the island today.

Early foreign influences came via trade with India, with Hindu-Buddhist traditions and beliefs influencing the island's coastal communities. Sumatra would later become the seat of power for the mighty Hindu-Buddhist Srivijaya kingdom (7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries), which dominated much of island Southeast Asia for over 400 years. Chinese settlers had been coming to Sumatra over the centuries, resulting in sizeable Chinese communities by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where they worked as artisans, businessmen, administrators and tax collectors, among other professions. Following the decline of Srivijaya, Islamic sultanates established themselves in the coastal areas from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and with the spread of Islam came cultural influences in architecture, textiles and clothing, and the court arts.

Sumatra's rich natural resources also attracted European traders who sought the much-wanted pepper, gold, and camphor and benzoin, ingredients for perfumery and incense-making. The Portuguese and the Dutch arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively and European influence left its mark on both the courts as well as remote tribal communities who were converted to Christianity.

"The exhibition examines how the various cultures in Sumatra have been influenced, and in turn shaped others, through interactions with the many foreign influences that arrived at the island. This approach to looking at culture as a synthesis of many different influences complements the way the ACM has curated its own galleries and exhibitions over the years," said Ms Heidi Tan, Senior Curator (Southeast Asia), Asian Civilisations Museum.

## **Exhibition Storyline and Highlights**

The exhibition opens with an introduction to Sumatra's pre-history, and then breaks into sections on Indian, Chinese, Islamic, European and regional influences.

### **Pre-history**

A key exhibition highlight is one of the oldest exhibits on show – a Bronze Age vessel from Jambi in East Sumatra. This vessel dates back over 2000 years and is elaborately decorated with motifs of hooks and spirals, which are iconic motifs found among many early Southeast Asian artefacts from that period.

### **Indian**

The Hindu-Buddhist traditions of Sumatra's Srivijayan rulers are reflected in a number of religious icons from Palembang, where the empire was based. An impressive sculpture of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, which weighs over 470 kilogrammes, is one of the highlights in this section.

### **Chinese**

Peranakan or 'local born' communities which resulted from inter-marriages between the Chinese and locals helped to spread their traditions, seen through the cross-adoption of both Chinese and local designs and techniques in textiles, clothing, jewellery and other materials on display in this section. The *rebana*, a type of local hand-drum, incorporates traditional Chinese symbols such as the Chinese phoenix and qilin motifs.

### **Islamic**

A resplendent gold crown that once belonged to the Sultan of Siak is testament to the powerful Islamic sultanates of Sumatra. Set with diamonds and rubies imported from West Asia, this famous crown still retains Hindu-Buddhist influence in the form of three lotus flowers. Royal regalia, such as this crown, were treasured heirlooms that symbolised the sultans' royal power and the right to rule.

## **Regional**

While international trade flourished, regional trade also took place between the people of Sumatra such as the Minangkabau, the Nias and the Batak. A highlight in this section is a glittering gold necklace, which would have been worn by Nias nobility, who traded slaves for gold from mainland Sumatra.

## **European**

Finally, with increasing European presence in Sumatra in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, items displaying a curious mix of European influences and local motifs were created for local use and for export. Of special note is a *tirai*, a ceremonial hanging with Mughal Indian origins, and full of surprising details drawn from various cultures. Its central motif is a European coat-of-arms, flanked by women in European dress and cavorting dogs. Floral motifs sewn in gold thread, typical of Islamic embroidery, decorate the entire hanging which is made of velvet, a popular local material.

“Just like Singapore, this ‘Island of Gold’ was a busy port and a meeting point for cultures from all over Asia. Through this exhibition, we hope that many Singaporeans will discover the richness of Sumatra’s history and culture, and the ancient links between Singapore and one of our closest neighbours,” said Ms Tan.

## **Public Programmes in conjunction with *Sumatra: Isle of Gold***

Visitors will have a chance to immerse themselves in *The Great Sumatran Adventure! Weekend Festival* from 28 to 29 August 2010. This festival will offer plenty of activities for the family ranging from traditional performances, craft activities like *batik*, kite-making and wood carving, and authentic Sumatran food sampling. In conjunction with the exhibition, the museum will also organise talks, curator’s tours and a range of other programmes designed to complement their museum experience.

## **APPENDIX: *Sumatra: Isle of Gold* Factsheet**

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## **About the Exhibition**

### **Sumatra: Isle of Gold**

苏门答腊：海上丝路中的金洲

### **Sumatera: Pulau Emas**

சுமத்ரா : பொந்தீவு

Exhibition Dates : 30 July to 7 November 2010

Venue : Special Exhibitions Gallery, Asian Civilisations Museum  
1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555

Website : [www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg)

Enquiries : 6332 7798 / [nhb\\_acm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_acm_vs@nhb.gov.sg)

Admission charges : \$8 (adults) / \$4 (concession). Family package: \$20 for up to 5 pax.

*Free admission for children aged 6 and below, students and senior citizens (locals and PRs only). 50% discount off admission for foreigners aged 60 and above. 50% discount every Friday, 7-9pm.*

Opening hours : Mondays – 1pm to 7pm;  
Tuesdays to Sundays – 9am to 7pm (to 9pm on Fridays)

Getting there : By MRT – Raffles Place, By Bus – 75, 100, 107, 130, 131, 167

## **Media Contacts**

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## **About the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM)**

The Asian Civilisations Museum's mission is to explore and present the cultures and civilisations of Asia, so as to promote awareness and appreciation of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans and their links to Southeast Asia and the world. The Asian Civilisations Museum first began its operations at Armenian Street in 1997, which closed at end-2005, and re-opened on 25 April 2008 as the Peranakan Museum. The ACM's flagship at the historic Empress Place Building opened on 2 March 2003.

## Exhibition Highlights

Caption	Image
<p><b>Vessel</b> Bronze Kerinci, Jambi Province c.300 BCE – 500CE Collection of National Museum of Indonesia MNI 1443</p>	 A bronze vessel, possibly a jar or pot, with a bulbous body and a short neck. The surface is covered in intricate relief patterns, including geometric and floral motifs. The color is a mix of green and brown, suggesting patina or corrosion.
<p><b>Figure of Avalokiteshvara</b> Stone Musi Ulu, Palembang, South Sumatra 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century Collection of National Museum of Indonesia MNI 247/D216</p>	 A stone figure of Avalokiteshvara, standing and facing forward. The figure is depicted with a serene expression, wearing a tall, pointed headdress. The body is adorned with intricate carvings, and the figure is shown in a standing posture with arms slightly away from the body.

**Hand-drum (*rebana*) with Chinese phoenix and *qilin* motifs**

Wood, goat hide, lacquer  
Palembang, South Sumatra  
20<sup>th</sup> century  
Collection of Provincial Museum of South Sumatra  
3-337



**Crown of the Sultan of Siak**

Gold, diamonds, rubies  
Siak, Riau province  
Before 1895  
Collection of National Museum of Indonesia  
MNI 27543



**Gold necklace**

Sheet gold  
North Nias  
Late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Collection of Mark Gordon



**Ceremonial hanging (*tira*) with European coat-of-arms, a pair of rhinoceros, women in Dutch dress and cavorting dogs**

Cotton, gold wrapped thread, felt/velvet  
Lampung, South Sumatra  
Early 20th century  
Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum  
T0587

