

Sir Stamford Raffles: collecting in Southeast Asia 1811-1824

High resolution images and caption sheet
available at <https://bit.ly/2ITvY5F>

19 September 2019 – 12 January 2020

Free

Room 91

Supported by the Singapore High Commission

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781 – 1826) spent most of his career as an East India Company official in Southeast Asia. He was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Java in 1811 and assumed the Lieutenant Governorship of Sumatra in 1818. Raffles is credited as being the founder of modern Singapore – but remains a controversial figure, particularly for his policies. When he was Lieutenant-Governor of Java, for example, he ordered troops to attack the most powerful court, which still has consequences to this day. Over time, he has been viewed as a scholarly expert on the region, a progressive reformer, a committed imperialist and an incompetent colonial official.

He was also an avid collector of objects from the region, particularly amassing material from Java. He acquired objects to show his European audience that Javanese society was worth colonising. The exhibition will showcase an important selection of Hindu-Buddhist antiquities, different types of theatrical puppets, masks, musical instruments and stone and metal sculpture. Today, these objects provide us with a vital record of the art and court cultures of Java from approximately the 7th century to the early 19th century.

Raffles' collection was one of the first large gatherings of material from the region, providing us with a window into the wider worlds of Southeast Asia and Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. The collection was given to the British Museum in two large donations, one in 1859 from Rev. William Charles Flint, Raffles' nephew, and the other in 1939 from Mrs J.H. Drake, Raffles' great-grandniece. The collection today comprises around 2,000 objects, mainly from Java, but also includes items from China, Sumatra (now part of Indonesia), India, Burma (Myanmar) and Siam (Thailand). The display will include more than 130 objects, ranging from expressive theatrical puppets in the Cirebon style from the north coast of Java and striking wooden character masks from central Java, which were new when Raffles acquired them, to ornate bronze buddhas and bodhisattvas, protective amulets (which Raffles mistook for coins), and drawings of sites, buildings and stone sculptures.

The exhibition is a collaboration with the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. A version of the exhibition was on display earlier in 2019 in Singapore to mark the bicentenary of the founding of the modern city-state. The British Museum display will

include seven loan objects from the Asian Civilisations Museum which will be seen in the UK for the first time, including an important trade textile from India.

Java was returned to the Dutch in 1815, and the exhibition concludes by looking at the period when Raffles was Lieutenant Governor of Bencoolen (Bengkulu) in southwestern Sumatra (1818-1824). Raffles' family suffered ill health while on Sumatra, and he booked passage on a ship called the *Fame* to return to Britain in 1824. Fifty miles out to sea, it caught fire and sank. There was no loss of life, but everything else went down with the ship. All of Raffles' administrative and collecting work was lost, including numerous irreplaceable Malay manuscripts, some dating from the 1400s. There were also more than 2,000 natural history drawings, live animals, including a tiger, and large amounts of information about the islands of Singapore, Borneo, and Sulawesi (then called Celebes). The loss of his papers also means that we do not know where or how he acquired his collections, including the ones from Java. In the two months that Raffles waited for another ship, he commissioned new natural history drawings and gathered together a few objects. Today the collections formed between 1818-24 include a textile, sword, staff, two hats, and a few wood sculptures from Nias. Yet what remains of all his various collections continues to stimulate reflection on the region and its multiple and complex histories.

Alexandra Green, Curator of the exhibition said 'Raffles has been the subject of many studies, but there has never been an assessment of the shape of his collections – why he collected what he did – so this exhibition has been an exciting exploration of new ideas. Additionally, because all his papers were lost, we do not know how his collections originated. The exhibition has been an opportunity to conduct further research with scholars in Indonesia and to make the new information available to the public here and in Asia. It has also been wonderful to collaborate with the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore and the Singapore High Commission in London to make the exhibition and catalogue a reality'.

Singapore High Commissioner to the United Kingdom HE Foo Chi Hsia said "As we mark the milestone in Singapore's 700-year history when Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore 200 years ago, I am delighted that we are able to bring a small part of Singapore's own collection to be exhibited here at the British Museum. This represents a ground-breaking collaboration between the British Museum and Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum. It provides us with the opportunity to critically re-examine, through the way Raffles collected, his understanding of Southeast Asia. Raffles' arrival opened a new chapter in our journey, which has always been about connecting the Southeast Asian region to the rest of the world through trade and enterprise. A deeper understanding of that history will provide an even firmer foundation for our Singapore-UK Partnership for the Future."

Follow updates on the Museum via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

@britishmuseum

You can also follow the blog at blog.britishmuseum.org or sign up for the e-newsletter.

Further information

Contact the Press Office:

020 7323 8394/8522

communications@britishmuseum.org.

Images available here: <https://bit.ly/2ITvY5F>