

Mellowing the Mélange: Ancient Southeast Asian Kingdoms in the Asian Civilizations Museum

Authors : Rin Li Si Samantha

Abstract : The Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore contains artifacts spanning thousands of years of history and possibly hundreds of communities and nations. Based in Singapore, its collections history and curation are deeply rooted in Singapore's national and international agendas: to be a cultural center within Southeast Asia and a global hub representing Asia to the world. As such, the position of Southeast Asian histories, particularly Southeast Asian ancient kingdoms, is a carefully negotiated one; its presence contingent on the territorialization and depoliticization of Southeast Asian ancient kingdoms, such that they remain palatable to modern nation-states and governments; its absence noted, strategically overlooked in favour of 'grander' cultural and global — oftentimes a misnomer for Western — narratives. This study undertakes a close reading of several key permanent exhibitions at the Asian Civilisations Museum in pursuit of how ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms are framed and forgotten to reveal a conscious mellowing of the mélange such that Singapore may be positioned as inheritor of Asia's cultural wealth.

Keywords : museum, Southeast Asia, art history, pre-colonial, national narratives

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